


THE CALL-BOX
MYSTERY

JOHN
IRONSIDE



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THE CALL-BOX MYSTERY

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THE CALL-BOX MYSTERY	JOHN IRNSIDE
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THE CALL-BOX MYSTERY

BY
JOHN IRONSIDE

AUTHOR OF
"THE RED SYMBOL," "FORGED IN STRONG FIRES," ETC.



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THE CALL-BOX MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

LADY RAWSON

"**I**'M extremely sorry, Carling. It's too bad to keep you to-night, but——"

"That's all right, sir. Lucky they came in to-night and not to-morrow. I shall soon be through with them."

"It's most awfully good of you," rejoined Sir Robert Rawson heartily. "I would deal with them myself, but we are dining with Lord Warrington, as you know."

"Yes, sir; but it's of no consequence really. I can spare the time perfectly well."

Already Carling's sleek head was bent over the special dispatches which had just been delivered at the private residence of Sir Robert Rawson. There were two sets, written in different languages, but both referring to one subject—secret intelligence concerning the strained relations between two foreign countries: a matter that at present was suspected rather than known, but that might at any moment develop on serious lines, and even occasion a war involving Great Powers.

These particular papers were probably of immense importance. That remained to be seen; and Carling's duty was to translate and prepare a *précis* of them for his chief.

They certainly had arrived at rather an awkward moment for the young secretary—on the eve of his six weeks' holiday, which would include a honeymoon, for he was to be married on the morrow.

"I don't know what on earth I shall do without you, Roger," Sir Robert remarked, casting a glance of mingled affection and compunction at the young man, whom he had learnt to regard as his right hand, and to whom he was sincerely attached, wishing with all his heart that he had a son like him; but he had married late in life and he and his wife were childless.

She entered the room at this moment, and he advanced to meet her with courtly apology.

"Have I kept you waiting, Paula? Forgive me."

"It is no matter, we are in good time," she answered in a voice so rich and soft that the words sounded like a caress, accompanied as they were by a smiling glance at her husband. "Why, is that poor Mr. Carling still at work? It is too bad of you, Robert, to detain him on this night of all others."

She spoke as though she had but just caught sight of the industrious secretary, yet as she entered the room she had seen him at once, and noted his occupation.

She crossed to his side now in a graceful, leisurely manner that, to her husband's admiring eyes, seemed perfectly natural. He did not perceive the keen glance she directed, not at the secretary, but at the papers over which he was poring.

"It is too bad!" she repeated in her caressing voice. "You should—what is the word?—ah, yes, you should *strike*, Mr. Carling."

Roger looked up and stumbled to his feet, thereby interposing himself as a screen between her and his writing-table.

"Not at all, though it's awfully kind of you to say so, Lady Rawson," he murmured confusedly. "As I told Sir Robert, I had nothing particular to do this evening;

Grace doesn't expect me, and I'd rather finish up everything to the last moment."

"Is the work important?" She directed the question to her husband.

"Yes, and we really must not hinder him. Good night, my boy. We shall see you to-morrow. You'll put those papers in the safe as usual, of course. I'll attend to them in the morning—or to-night, perhaps."

"Yes, sir. Good night. Good-bye, Lady Rawson."

"Not good-bye; you forget that I also will come to the marriage," she said graciously, giving him her hand.

"We shall be honoured," he murmured, as he bowed over the small gloved hand, with outward deference and inward aversion.

He disliked and distrusted his chief's lovely young wife—why he did not know, for her manner towards him had always been charming. It was a purely instinctive feeling which, naturally, he had carefully concealed, and of which he was not a little ashamed; but there it was.

She was of foreign birth, but of what nationality no one seemed to know; a strikingly handsome young woman, whose marriage to the elderly financier had created a considerable sensation, for Sir Robert had long been considered a confirmed bachelor. Malicious tongues had predicted a speedy and scandalous dissolution of this union of May and December, but those predictions were as yet unfulfilled, for Lady Rawson's conduct was irreproachable. She appeared as absolutely devoted to her husband as he was to her, and even the most inveterate and malignant gossips found no opportunity of assailing her fair fame. Yet, although immensely admired she was not popular. There was something of the sphinx about her—a serene but impenetrable mystery. Roger Carling was by no means the only person who felt that strong aversion from her.

He watched her now as, by her husband's side, she recrossed the large room, moving with the languid, sinuous

grace peculiar to her. She looked royally beautiful to-night, in a diaphanous robe of vivid green and gold tissue, an emerald tiara poised proudly on her splendid, simply dressed black hair, a magnificent emerald collar scintillating on her white neck.

She turned at the door and flashed a farewell smile at the young man, to which, as to Sir Robert's genial nod, he responded with a bow.

"What is there about her that always makes me think of a snake?" he asked himself as, with a sigh of genuine relief, he reseated himself at the writing-table. "And Grace feels just the same, though she has always been jolly nice to her. I wish she wasn't coming to-morrow, but of course it can't be helped. Wonder what took her to that unlikely place yesterday, for I'll swear it was she, though I've never seen her in that get-up before, but I'd know her walk anywhere. However, it's none of my business where she goes or what she does."

He addressed himself to his task again—an absorbing one, for the papers contained startling and most valuable information, which should be communicated to the Government with as little delay as possible. That was Sir Robert's duty, of course.

He finished at last, folded and arranged the papers in order, with his translation and notes on top, tied them with red tape, stuffed them into a blue, canvas-lined official envelope printed with Sir Robert's address, sealed the package—quite a bulky one—and bestowed it in a small safe in the wall, cunningly concealed behind one of the oak panels. Only he and his chief knew the secret of the panel or possessed keys of the safe.

"Thank goodness, that's done," he ejaculated, as he closed the panel, which slid noiselessly into place. "Ten o'clock, by Jove! Those fellows will think I'm never coming."

He was to spend the last night of his bachelor existence at Austin Starr's chambers in Westminster, where a

convivial supper-party awaited him. He had already telephoned that he would not arrive till late.

In the hall he encountered Thomson, Sir Robert's confidential man—a short, spare, reticent individual, who had grown grey in his master's service.

"Won't you have some coffee, sir, or a whisky-and-soda," he asked, as he helped Roger into his coat.

"No, thanks. Good night, Thomson, and good-bye. I shan't be back for some weeks, you know."

"Good-bye, sir, and the best of good luck to you and the young lady."

The last words were an astonishing concession, for Thomson seldom uttered an unnecessary syllable—not even to his master. Roger was surprised and touched.

"Good old Thomson!" he thought, as he hailed a passing taxi. "I suppose he actually approves of me after all, though I should never have guessed it! What a queer old stick he is."

He was greeted uproariously by the small assemblage that awaited him at Austin Starr's snug flat in Great Smith Street: Starr himself, a smart young American journalist, whom he had met when he was on service during the war, and with whom he had formed a friendship that seemed likely to prove permanent; George Winston, a Foreign Office clerk, who was to be his "best man" to-morrow; and some half-dozen others.

Already he had dismissed from his mind everything connected with the task that had detained him, and never gave it another thought. But it was abruptly recalled to him the next morning when he was awakened by his host.

"Real sorry to disturb you, Roger. Late? No, it's quite bright and early, but they've rung you up from Grosvenor Gardens—Sir Robert himself."

"Sir Robert! What on earth can he want at this hour!" he exclaimed, springing out of bed and hurrying to the telephone.

"Is that you, sir? . . . Those papers? They're in the safe. . . . *Not there!* But they must be. Sealed up in one of the blue envelopes. They can't have been stolen—it's impossible. . . . Yes, of course, sir, I'll come up at once."

CHAPTER II

"MURDER MOST FOUL!"

"**I** WANT to telephone."

"Yes, madam. What number?"

"I—— Can't I ring up for myself?"

The momentary hesitation in speech caused the busy little postmistress to glance up at her customer—a lady of medium height and slender figure, well but quietly dressed. She wore a motor hat with a dark-blue veil which fell loosely over her face, shrouding her features; but Mrs. Cave judged her to be handsome, and guessed her elderly, for she saw the gleam of white hair. A nervous old lady, probably unused to telephoning.

"No, madam. If you will just give me the number I will tell you when you are through. The box is at the end of the shop."

The lady glanced in the direction indicated and again hesitated, standing at the railed-in post office counter and resting a fairly large morocco bag on it—a dressing or jewel bag—though she retained her grip of the handle with both hands. The right hand was ungloved and several valuable rings sparkled on the delicate white fingers.

"Oh, very well! No. 5339 Granton. How much?" she said at last, speaking in a low voice, with a slight but perceptible foreign accent. Removing her bejewelled hand from the bag, she fumbled in a châtelaine purse and produced a shilling.

Mrs. Cave entered and applied for the call before she took the coin and dealt out the change.

The bell tinkled, and at the same instant two other customers came into the shop.

"You're through, madam," said Mrs. Cave, indicating the call-box. "Your change."

But the lady was already on her way to the box, and, setting the change aside on the counter, the postmistress turned to serve the new-comers—a woman who wanted to draw ten shillings from the savings bank, a man and a child demanding stamps. As she attended to them briskly in turn, two more people entered and went to the stationery counter opposite.

Mrs. Cave glanced at them apologetically; fortunately she knew them both, but it really was trying that a rush should come just at this moment when she was single-handed. Her husband was out, her niece at dinner upstairs.

"That's your parcel, Mr. Laidlaw," she called from behind her grating. "There, on the right. Jessie will be down to serve you in half a minute, Miss Ellis."

As she spoke she rang the bell to summon her niece, and also, as the telephone sounded the end of the call, she mechanically rang off. Other customers came in, and for a few minutes she and Jessie were as busy as they could be, and only when the shop was clear again did she notice the change set aside for the telephone customer.

"There, that lady never asked for her change after all, and I didn't see her go out either. I dare say she'll be back for it directly. Did you finish your dinner, Jessie? No? Then you'd better run up and have it while there's time."

Jessie Jackson, a nice-looking, fresh-complexioned girl, very like her capable little aunt, came from behind the news counter, and passed along to the door at the back leading to the house, close by and at right angles to that of the telephone box; a dark corner on this dull, foggy November day.

“There’s something wet here!” she exclaimed. “Somebody must have been spilling some water.”

She reached for an electric switch and turned on the light.

An instant later Mrs. Cave heard a shriek that brought her rushing out of the post office, to find the girl leaning back against the doorpost, her face blanched, her dilated eyes staring at the horrible pool in which she was standing—a pool of blood, forming from a stream that trickled over the sill of the telephone-box, the door of which was partly open.

“My God! What’s happened?” cried Mrs. Cave. “Here, pull yourself together, girl, and get out of the way.”

Clutching Jessie’s arm she hauled her aside and pulled open the door. Something lurched forward—a heap surmounted by a blue veil.

“It’s her, the lady herself; she—she must have broken a blood vessel—or something,” she gasped, bending down and trying to lift the huddled figure, for she was a clever and resourceful little woman, and as yet no suspicion of the ghastly truth had flashed to her mind. “Run, Jessie—run and call someone—anyone.”

But Jessie had collapsed on a chair by the counter, sobbing and shaking, half-fainting, and it was her aunt whose screams summoned the neighbours and passers-by. The greengrocer from the opposite corner shop was first on the scene, wiping his mouth as he ran, for he too had been disturbed at dinner. In less than a minute the shop was filled to overflowing, and a crowd had gathered outside, through which a belated policeman shouldered his way.

“’Ere, make way there! Stand back, will you? What’s up ’ere?” he began with pompous authority. “Good Lord! Why, it’s murder!”

“It can’t be—how can it?” sobbed poor Mrs. Cave, whose nerve had given way at last. “Why, there wasn’t a soul anywhere near her!”

“Do you know who she is?” demanded the officer, bending over the corpse, but not touching it. The woman

was dead, not a doubt of that. It was best to leave her as she was till the doctor arrived.

A ghastly object she looked lying huddled there, her head still shrouded in the blue motor veil, now horribly drenched and bedabbled. It had been flung back from her face—probably she had raised it herself when she entered the box a few short minutes before—and her naturally handsome features were distorted to an expression of fear and horror, the dark eyes half open, the lips drawn back showing the white, even teeth. There was no doubt as to the cause of death, for under her left ear was plainly visible the still-welling wound—a clean stab less than half an inch broad that had completely severed the jugular vein.

“I never saw her before,” cried Mrs. Cave, wringing her hands helplessly. “She just came in to telephone, and when she went into the box several people came in and we were busy for a few minutes, and I never thought a word about her till we found her—Jessie and I—like that! She *must* have done it herself—and in our shop, too! Oh, whatever shall we do!”

At the moment the obvious thing to be done was to clear the shop and summon the local doctor and the district police inspector, who arrived simultaneously a few minutes later.

The woman had been murdered, not a doubt of that, for it was impossible that such a wound could have been self-inflicted. It was extraordinarily deep, penetrating nearly three inches, and causing practically instantaneous death; while no weapon whatever was discovered nor anything that, at the moment, disclosed the identity of the victim.

One fact was established at once: that she had been partially disguised, for the white hair which Mrs. Cave had noticed proved to be a wig—what hairdressers describe as a “transformation”—adjusted over the natural hair, silky, luxuriant dark tresses closely coiled about the shapely head. Her age was judged by the doctor to be about five-and-twenty, and she was a fine and handsome young

woman, presumably wealthy also. Certainly her white, well-shaped, beautifully kept hands had had no acquaintance with work of any kind, and the rings on the slender fingers were extremely valuable, among them a wedding ring. On the floor of the box was found her gold purse, containing a sum of four pounds odd in notes and silver.

But of the murderer there was no trace whatever, except, indeed, a wet and bloodstained dishcloth lying in the sink of a little scullery place behind the shop. The house was originally a private one, and the whole of the ground floor had been converted into business premises. The Caves' kitchen and living-room were on the first floor, the stairs going up just inside the door leading into the shop at the back, beside the telephone box. At the foot of the staircase was a private door opening on to a side street, and beyond it the scullery and a fairly long garden, with a door at the end through which also the side street could be gained. This door had bolts top and bottom, but they were now drawn back, though the door itself was closed.

“Is this door always kept open like this?” asked the inspector of little Mrs. Cave, who, though still piteously agitated, followed him and managed to answer his many questions promptly and intelligibly.

“No, it's never unbolted except when the dustmen come, and I bolted it myself after them yesterday.”

The inspector nodded, and jotted a line in his notebook. Stepping out into the street, he glanced up and down. It was a particularly quiet and respectable little street, the upper end flanked by the walls of the gardens belonging to the two corner houses, the lower by small suburban villas, each with its tiny garden in front: a street where usually at this time of day the only passers-by were children returning to school, but where already a big and increasing crowd was assembled at the corner by the Caves' shop and house.

“There's the inspector; you just come along and tell him what you saw, Margie,” cried a woman, who thereupon

ran towards him, dragging a pretty little girl by the hand. "Please, sir, my Margie saw a man come out of the side door and run away just before the screaming began."

"What's that? Come, tell me all about it, my dear. Quick, where did he come from? This door?"

"No, sir—that," said the child promptly, pointing to the house door. "Mother sent me for a lemon, and——"

"What was he like?"

"One of them shovers, sir, that drives the taxis. He was saying swear words, and run ever so fast down the street." Again she pointed.

"Did you see his cab—a taxicab?"

"No, there wasn't only me and the man."

"Should you know him again?"

"Yes, sir, I think so."

"Good girl! What's your name? Margery Davies—at number six? That's right."

With a kindly nod, leaving Margie and her mother to be surrounded and questioned by the excited crowd that had followed them and listened to the brief colloquy—he entered the garden, just in time to encounter Jessie Jackson, who stumbled against him, and would have fallen if he had not shot out a ready arm to support her.

"Hallo! Who's this young woman, and what's the matter with her?" he demanded, lowering her to the ground, gently enough, and scrutinizing her face—a pretty, innocent-looking young face, deadly pale at this moment, for the girl had fainted.

"It's Jessie, my niece, that found the poor thing, as I told you. It's upset her—no wonder. Why, Jessie, dear," cried Mrs. Cave, incoherently, kneeling beside her and frantically chafing her limp hands.

"I must see her presently, when you've got her round," said the inspector, and returned to the house.

CHAPTER III

THE TAXICAB

A CURIOUS hush brooded over the shop, closed by order of the inspector. Even the post office business must be suspended for the present.

On the floor between the counters was a long object covered by a coloured tablecloth—the corpse of the murdered woman, with limbs decently straightened now. Beside it, on a shop chair, sat the doctor, grave and silent, awaiting the arrival of the ambulance which would convey the body to the mortuary, there to await identification.

Outside the glass doors two constables were stationed, monotonously requesting the crowd to “pass along there”; and behind the post office counter was a third, who turned to his superior.

“I’ve rung up 5339 Granton, sir, and——”

“Half a minute,” said the inspector, going to the telephone and giving instructions to the station, that instituted an immediate search for a fugitive taxicab driver—one who presumably belonged to and was familiar with the neighbourhood.

“Well, what about 5339?”

“They say that were rung up, sir, just about the time—one thirty-five—but nobody spoke, and they supposed it must have been a wrong call as they were rung off again immediately.”

“Who are they?”

“A flat in Lely Mansions, Chelsea, sir, name of Winston; it was a maid servant spoke, but the name’s all right—Mr. George Winston. I’ve looked it up in the Directory.”

A slight commotion was heard from the back, Mrs. Cave was helping her niece up the stairs, and Inspector Evans promptly followed to the kitchen over the back shop, which was also the living-room, with the remains of dinner on the table, including a plate with a mutton chop and potatoes, untouched.

The girl had only partially recovered, and was trembling and sobbing. As the inspector appeared in the doorway she uttered a moan as of fear, and really looked as if she was about to faint again.

"Come, come, this won't do," he said, cheeringly and encouragingly. "Pull yourself together, missie. Have you got a drop of brandy to give her, Mrs. Cave? It's what she wants."

"There's some in my cupboard upstairs, in case of illness. There, sit down, dearie, while I run and fetch it."

Little Mrs. Cave hurried away, and the girl eyed her companion shrinkingly, but to her momentary relief he said nothing—merely glanced round the room in a seemingly casual manner. In half a minute her aunt fluttered back, bringing a small flat bottle half filled with brandy.

"Give it her neat, ma'am. There, that's better; it's been an upsetting time for you both, eh?"

"That it has!" Mrs. Cave assented vehemently. "I can't believe it even now, and never shall I forget it. I don't wonder the child nearly died of fright. And—why, Jessie, dear, why ever hadn't you eaten your dinner?"

"I was just going to—when you rang—and—and——"

The mumbling words broke off and Jessie hid her face in her hands.

"You didn't feel to want your dinner then?"

The inspector's voice was mild but insistent.

"Or you hadn't time to begin—was that it?"

"But you came up ever so long before. I left it all ready for you; we haven't got a servant just now, you see, only a girl that comes in mornings," Mrs. Cave interposed, flustered, perplexed, and explanatory.

"Who was here talking to you, so that you forgot to eat your dinner?"

That question was blunt and sharp enough, and Mrs. Cave stared in incredulous astonishment and dismay from the inspector to Jessie.

"Come, answer me, missie!"

The girl looked up at that, and the wild fear in her eyes rendered his suspicion a certainty.

"There wasn't anyone here," she muttered.

"Then what's this?" It was a half-smoked cigarette, that he picked up from a used plate at the other side of the table—the plate from which Mrs. Cave had eaten her pudding an hour before. "Do either of you ladies smoke Woodbines?"

"Smoke? I should think not!" cried Mrs. Cave. "Jessie, Jessie—oh, what does it all mean?"

The girl started to her feet, her eyes glaring, a spot of colour flashing into each pallid cheek.

"I don't know. I tell you there wasn't anyone here. I'll swear it! What do you want to goad me like this for? I won't answer another question—so there!" she vociferated hysterically. "I never murdered her. I never knew or thought a thing about it all till I saw—I saw——"

Her fictitious strength departed, and she sank down again, wailing like a distraught creature.

"You'll have to answer questions at the inquest to-morrow, my girl, and you'll be on your oath then," said Evans, stowing the cigarette in the pocket of his notebook as he retreated. He knew she was concealing something, but recognized that it was impossible to get any information out of her at the moment, while there were many other matters that claimed his immediate attention.

The ambulance had arrived, together with several more police constables, and a taxicab had drawn up by the kerb. From it an alert-looking, clean-shaved young man alighted, and, pushing his way authoritatively through the crowd, began interrogating the men on guard at the door.

Evans saw him through the glass, recognized an acquaintance, and himself opened the door.

"Come in, Mr. Starr; might have known you'd be turning up, though how you got wind of it so soon beats me. Vultures aren't in it with you newspaper gents!"

"Pure chance this time. I was on my way to a wedding and saw the crowd," said Austin Starr. "You'll give me the facts as far as they go? Is that—it?"

Evans nodded.

"A lady; we don't know yet who she is."

At a sign from him the doctor bent, and with a quiet reverent touch uncovered the face. Starr looked down at it, and started uncontrollably.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated, in an awestruck whisper.

"You know her?"

"I've seen her a good few times. She's Lady Rawson—Sir Robert Rawson's wife."

"Lady Rawson!"

"That's so; and I'm plumb certain she was to have been at this very wedding to-day, and Sir Ralph, too!"

"What wedding's that?"

"Sir Robert's secretary, Roger Carling. We're old friends; he slept at my place last night, and he's marrying Miss Armitage at St. Paul's Church near here. But that's no matter. Give me the story right now, please."

A story that, a few minutes later, was augmented by the startling news that the taxicab for which the police were on the look out had already been traced, and under singular circumstances. Recklessly driven, it had come to grief at the Broadway, a mile or so distant, by colliding with a motor van; with the result that the cab was smashed, the driver—identified as Charles Sadler, No. C417—badly injured, while within the vehicle was found Lady Rawson's bag, which had been cut open by some sharp instrument and was quite empty.

CHAPTER IV

A BELATED BRIDEGROOM

WHILE the tragic commotion in the High Road was at its height a very different scene was being enacted at the fine old riverside church three-quarters of a mile away. A smart wedding is a rare event in the suburbs, and, despite the gloomy weather conditions—for a thick fog hung over the river and was now rapidly extending inland—an interested crowd assembled outside, watching the arrival of the many guests, dimly seen through the thickening murk, while along the Mall was a line of carriages and motors, looking like a file of fiery-eyed monsters, when the rapidly increasing darkness necessitated the lighting of their head-lamps.

The bevy of bridesmaids waited in the porch, chief among them Winnie Winston, a tall, handsome girl, with frank, laughing blue eyes. She alone of the little group appeared undaunted by the sinister gloom.

"For goodness' sake, don't look so lugubrious, girls!" she counselled, in a laughing undertone. "It's too bad of the fog to come just now—after such a lovely morning too!—but it can't be helped, and——"

She turned as someone touched her arm—her brother George, who was "best man" to-day, and even her high spirits were checked by his worried expression.

"I say, Win, Roger hasn't turned up yet. What on earth's to be done?"

"Not turned up! Why, where is he? Haven't you been with him?"

"No. When I got to Starr's rooms he wasn't there.

He left a message that Sir Robert had 'phoned for him, and if he didn't get back by one o'clock he'd come straight on to the church, but he's not here."

"Perhaps there's a fog in Town too," she suggested, with a backward glance at the Rembrandtesque scene outside, where the shaft of light from the open door shone weirdly on the watching faces. "He'll come directly—he must! Where's Mr. Starr?"

"Haven't seen him."

"Then they're probably together, or he may be coming on with Sir Robert and Lady Rawson. They're not here yet, are they? What on earth can Sir Robert have wanted him for this morning? Horribly inconsiderate of him! Goodness, here's Grace! Have you told the vicar that Roger hasn't come? Then you'd better do so."

She resumed her place as the bride advanced on her father's arm, looking like a white ghost in her gleaming satin robe, with the filmy veil shrouding her bent head and her fair face.

"What's the matter?" whispered the second bridesmaid.

"Nothing. S—sh!" answered Winnie, and breathed a silent thanksgiving as the choir struck up the hymn and began slowly to advance up the aisle, the bridal procession following. But her heart sank as she saw her brother hurry along the south aisle and out at the side door, evidently in the hope of meeting the tardy bridegroom.

Where could he be? And why hadn't Austin Starr arrived? Not that Starr's absence was anything extraordinary, for his exacting profession rendered him a socially erratic being. It was for that very reason that he had refused to fill the office of best man.

The hymn came to an end, the choir stood in their stalls, the bridal party halted at the chancel and there was a horrible pause, punctuated by the uneasy whispers exchanged by the guests.

The vicar came forward at length and proposed an

adjournment to the vestry. He was no ordinary cleric, but a man with a fine, forceful, and magnetic personality, endowed, moreover, with consummate tact and good feeling; in brief, the Reverend Joseph Iverson was—and is—a Christian and gentleman in every sense of those often misused words.

"We can wait more comfortably in here," he announced cheerily, as he brought forward a rush-bottomed chair for the bride, and in fatherly fashion, with a compelling hand on her shoulder, placed her in it.

"There, sit you down, and don't be distressed, my dear child. I'm quite sure there's no cause for alarm. Anyone—even a bridegroom—may be excused for losing his way in such a fog as this that has descended upon us. That's the explanation of his absence, depend upon it. And he will arrive in another minute or two—in a considerable fluster, I'll be bound, poor lad!"

His genial laugh reassured the others, who stood round, awkward, anxious, and embarrassed, as people naturally are at such a moment; but Grace looked up at him with a glance so tragic that it startled and distressed him.

He had known her ever since she was a little child, and never had he thought to see such an expression in her gentle grey eyes.

"It's not that—not the fog," she whispered, so low that he had to bend his head to catch the words. "Something terrible has happened; I feel it—I'm certain of it!"

Winnie Winston, standing close beside her, overheard the whisper. Her eyes met the vicar's in mutual interrogation, perplexity, and dismay, and the same thought flashed through both their minds. Grace knew something, feared something; but what?

"Nonsense!" he responded. "You are nervous and upset—that's only natural; but you mustn't start imagining all sorts of things, for——"

"Here he is!" exclaimed Winnie in accents of fervent relief, as Roger, attended by George Winston, hurried into

the vestry, hot and agitated, looking very unlike a bridegroom, especially as he was still wearing his ordinary morning suit.

He had eyes and speech only for his bride.

"Grace! Forgive me, darling! I couldn't help it really. Sir Robert kept me, and then I couldn't get a cab, and had to walk from—from the station." She did not notice the momentary hesitation that marked the last words, though she remembered it afterwards. "I lost my way in the fog and thought I should never get here in time!"

"Just as I said!" remarked the vicar triumphantly. "Come along now, we've no time to lose."

He led the way, a stately self-possessed figure, and the delayed service proceeded.

"Oh, Roger, I was so frightened!" Grace confided to her bridegroom as they drove slowly back through the gloom to her father's house. "I felt sure something dreadful had happened to you; and the fog coming on like this too! It—it seems so unlucky, so sinister!"

She shivered, and he clasped her more closely, with masculine indifference to the danger of crumpling her finery.

"Cheer up, darling, it's all right. We shall soon be out of the fog and into the sunshine," he laughed. "And the fog wasn't the chief cause of delay, after all. I should have got to the church before it came on if I hadn't had to go to Sir Robert. I was awfully upset about it, but it couldn't be helped."

"Why, is anything wrong?"

"Afraid so. Some important papers have disappeared. I put them in the safe myself last night; the Rawsons were dining out and I stayed rather late, over these very papers. When Sir Robert went to get them this morning they were gone, though there was nothing to show that the safe had been tampered with; in fact, it hadn't. It's a most mysterious thing!"

He tried to speak lightly, but her sensitive ears caught

the note of anxiety in his voice, and that queer sense of foreboding assailed her afresh.

"Oh, Roger, have they been found?"

"They hadn't when I came away soon after twelve."

"Then—then what will happen? Were they very important?"

"Very," he replied, ignoring the first question, which was really unanswerable. "However, it's no use worrying about them, darling; if they should have turned up Sir Robert is sure to come or telephone. Here we are!"

There was no time to spare for further thought or conjecture concerning the mystery of the missing papers until, an hour and a half later, they were on their way to Victoria, whirling rapidly along in a taxi, for the fog had lifted.

They had none too much time to get the train to Dover, where they intended to stay the night at the "Lord Warden" and cross to Calais next day, *en route* for Paris and the Riviera.

"The Rawsons didn't come after all," Grace remarked. "Mother was so disappointed, poor dear, for she had been telling every one about them, and then they never turned up! I'm not sorry though—at least about Lady Rawson. I don't know what there is about her that always makes me think of a snake. That sounds very ungrateful when she gave me these lovely furs"—she glanced down at the costly chinchilla wrap and muff she wore, which had been Lady Rawson's wedding gift—"but really I can't help it."

"Same here! And it really is curious considering she's always been so jolly decent to us both. I wonder——"

He broke off, knitting his brows perplexedly, and as if in response to his unspoken thought Grace exclaimed:

"Roger, do you think she could have had anything to do with those missing papers?"

He glanced at her in astonishment.

"What makes you ask that, darling?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. It just flashed into my

mind. But do you think so? Sir Robert didn't 'phone to you, did he?"

"No. And I don't know what to think about Lady Rawson. Oh, bother the papers; let's forget all about them—for to-day, anyhow! I say, beloved, it doesn't seem possible that we're really married and off on our honeymoon, does it?"

She laughed, softly and shyly, and again the shadow fled for a time. What did anything matter save the fact that they were together, with all the world before them?

"Why don't you smoke?" she asked presently. "I'm sure you're dying for a cigarette, you poor boy; and I don't believe you had anything to eat at the house—it was all such a fluster. We'll have tea in the train, if George Winston has the sense to order a tea-basket for us."

"Trust old George for that," laughed Roger, feeling in one pocket after the other. "He never forgets anything. Now, where on earth is that cigarette case?"

"Did you have it this morning?"

"Of course I did. It's the one you gave me at Christmas; I've never been without it since."

"Perhaps it's in your other suit," she suggested; "the clothes you were to have worn."

"No, it's not, for I had it all right this morning; but I haven't got it now, that's certain!"

His face and manner expressed more concern than mere loss of a cigarette case would seem to warrant, even though it was one of her gifts to him.

"Never mind. I dare say it will turn up; and perhaps you'll have time to get some at Victoria. We're nearly there. Why, Roger, what's the matter?"

The cab had halted by the station entrance in Wilton Road, waiting its turn to enter, and Roger, still fumbling in his pockets in the futile search for the cigarette case, suddenly leaned forward and stared out of the window, uttering a quick exclamation as of surprise and horror.

There was the usual bustling throng passing in and out

of the station, and on the kerb stood a newsboy vociferating monotonously,

"'Orrible murder of a Society lady ; pyper—speshul."

"What is it, Roger ? Oh, what is it ?" cried Grace, leaning forward in her turn and craning her pretty neck. The newsboy turned aside at that instant, and she did not see the placard he was exhibiting, but Roger had seen it :

LADY
RAWSON
MURDERED !

The great black letters seemed to hit him in the face. He felt for a moment as if he had received a physical and stunning blow.

"What is it ?" Grace repeated, as the cab glided on.

"What ? Oh, nothing at all, dear. I thought I saw someone I knew," he muttered confusedly. But his face was ghastly, and little beads of sweat started out on his forehead.

"Here's George !" he added, and Winston, who had gone on with the luggage, opened the door of the taxi. He also looked worried and flustered, though perhaps that was only natural since he greeted them with :

"Here you are at last ! I thought you were going to miss the train. We've only a bare minute, but the luggage is in all right, and I've reserved a compartment. Come on."

He hustled them on to the platform, and as Grace, bewildered and disturbed, entered the carriage, he detained Roger, ostensibly for the purpose of handing him the tickets.

"I say, have you heard the news—about Lady Rawson ?"

"I saw a placard a moment ago, and I can't credit it."

"It's true enough, I'm afraid. Awful, isn't it ? So mysterious too, and within a mile of the church where you

were married—that makes it all the more horrible. Here's a paper ; don't let Grace see it though ; keep the whole thing from her as long as you can. It will upset——”

“Going on, sir ? Step in, please.”

At the guard's admonition Roger sprang in, the door was slammed, the whistle sounded, and as the train glided away George Winston ran alongside, waving his hat and shouting with an excellent assumption of gaiety.

“Good-bye, Grace—good-bye, old man. Good luck to you both.”

Roger leaned out of the window and nodded as if in responsive farewell, an action that gave him a few seconds in which to regain his self-possession and marshal his distracted thoughts.

George was right. The knowledge of the tragedy that necessarily would affect them both so strongly must be kept from Grace as long as possible. That it should have occurred on their wedding day, and that the victim should have been the woman who was to have been the principal wedding guest seemed monstrous, incredible. Yet it was true ! Hastily he stuffed the evening paper Winston had given him into his pocket. If he had kept it in his hand he could not have resisted the impulse to read the fatal news, and he dare not trust himself to do that at present. Grace's voice, with a new, nervous note in it, roused him to the necessity of facing the situation.

“Roger ! Do take care, dear. You'll lose your hat or——”

“Or my head ? Mustn't lose that, or it will be all up with me, considering that I lost my heart ages ago ! ”

He laughed as he settled himself in the seat opposite her, but he did not meet her eyes, dark with trouble and perplexity. She loved him with all the strength of her nature—a nature essentially sweet and pure and steadfast. She thought she understood his every mood ; but now, on this supreme day that linked her life to his once and for all, his manner was so strange that her heart failed her.

His restless gaze lighted on a tea-basket and a pile of periodicals ranged on the cushions beside her.

"Hallo! So he thought of the tea after all. Good old George! Let's have it, shall we, darling?"

He talked gaily, irresponsibly, as they drank their tea, but she was not deceived—was more than ever certain that he was concealing something from her, though what it might be she could not imagine.

Presently she leant back in her corner and closed her eyes, but after an interval of silence she glanced up. Roger's face was concealed behind a newspaper, which he appeared to be studying intently.

"Any news?" she asked. "I don't believe I've looked at a paper for days."

He did not lower the sheet immediately, and she noticed, half mechanically, that his grip on it tightened. She recalled later, as one does recall such trifles when circumstances have invested them with special significance, the little convulsive movement of his hands—fine, characteristic hands they were, strong and nervous.

"Nothing of any consequence; these rags are all alike," he answered, as he tossed the paper out of the open window and moved impetuously to her side. "Grace! My own—my very own at last, there's nothing in the world matters to you and me to-day except ourselves!"

He caught and held her in his embrace with a passion that increased her vague fears, for hitherto he had never been a demonstrative lover, devoted though they were to each other.

He kissed her lips, her eyes, her soft white throat, fiercely, hungrily.

"Roger, Roger, don't; you—you frighten me!" she gasped, weak and breathless. "Oh——"

Her head drooped limply on to his shoulder. For a moment he thought she had actually fainted, and the shock restored his self-control.

"Forgive me, sweetheart!" he cried with quick

compunction. "I must have been mad to upset you so. It's been an upsetting sort of day, hasn't it? But it's all right now, really!"

He was holding her now firmly, tenderly, protectively, master of himself once more; and she nestled against him, revived and reassured. He was her own Roger again—the man whom she loved and trusted.

"It was silly of me," she confessed, smiling up at him—an April smile, for the tears had risen to her sweet grey eyes. "And you're right, dear; it has been an upsetting day, with the fog, and Sir Robert detaining you, and—and everything else. And you're still worrying about those missing papers. I know you are, though you're trying to pretend you're not! Perhaps you think I might be—oh, I don't know how to put it—jealous. No, that's not the word I want. That you're afraid I might be vexed because you could think of anything in the world except me, on this day, of all the days in our life! But it's not so, Roger—really it isn't! I want to share your troubles—I mean to share them. I—I'm your wife."

Too deeply moved for words he held her to his heart, and again their lips met, though this time the kiss was reverent as a sacrament.

CHAPTER V

RETURNED !

“**Y**OU are certain no one but yourself and Mr. Carling possesses a key to the safe, Sir Robert ? ”
“ Absolutely.”

“ And you think it impossible that anyone may have obtained either of the keys and had a duplicate made.”

“ No copy has been made,” Sir Robert answered. “ The pattern is unique, it could not be reproduced except by the makers, and I telephoned to them this morning. In any case they would not have made another key except from my personal instructions.”

“ H’m.”

Snell, the detective, who had been summoned to Grosvenor Gardens on that eventful afternoon, stood thoughtfully sliding the secret panel to and fro.

“ You are sure no one could have access to either of the existing keys—in the course of the night, or early this morning ? ”

“ Quite sure. Carling declares that his was never out of his possession for an instant till he handed it to me just now, and I put it on the ring with my own.”

Sir Robert pulled the keys, attached to a strong steel chain, out of his trousers pocket, and slipped them back again.

“ Just so. I’d like to have seen Mr. Carling, but of course he had to go ; a man doesn’t get married every day. Where do you keep your own keys at night, Sir Robert ? ”

“ Under my pillow. It is quite impossible that anyone

can have obtained possession of them without my knowledge."

"Yet the papers disappeared," remarked the detective dryly. "Well, will you give me a description of them, Sir Robert? You say they were secret dispatches; were they in cipher?"

"One was; it was in French, and would be quite unintelligible to anyone who did not possess the key to the code used. Mr. Carling's report on them both was also written in our private cipher, which only he and I understand."

"Have you a key to that cipher?"

"Only in our heads; Carling invented it, and we memorized it."

"How about the French code? Was that memorized also?"

"By ourselves, yes; at least we are so familiar with it that we never need to consult the code. It's in the drawer of the safe."

"That has not been stolen, then?"

"No. The theft of the French paper and of Carling's report really does not matter much, for practically it would be impossible for any outside person to decipher them; but the other, which is by far the most important, was not in cipher, unfortunately."

"What language was it in?"

"Russian."

Snell glanced up quickly, as the thought flashed to his mind that Lady Rawson was herself said to be Russian by birth. Sir Robert did not meet his eyes. He appeared to be regarding an ivory paper-knife that he was fingering. His face was drawn and haggard; he seemed to have aged by ten years in the course of the last few hours, yet he was perfectly self-possessed.

"Whom do you suspect, Sir Robert?"

The blunt, point-blank question would have startled any ordinary man into an admission—even by an unguarded

gesture—that he was concealing something. But Sir Robert Rawson's face betrayed nothing, and he continued to play with the paper-knife as he replied :

" If I had any reason to suspect anyone, I should have told you at once, Mr. Snell. The whole affair is a mystery to me."

" They were in the safe last night ? "

" I cannot say. As a matter of fact, I meant to have dealt with them last night, but when we returned—Lady Rawson and I were at a dinner party—I felt extremely tired and went straight to bed. When I found the papers were missing this morning I was not especially alarmed at the moment ; I imagined they had proved to be of little consequence, and that perhaps Carling had taken them with him to finish later. It was only when I rang him up on the telephone, and he came round, that I realized how serious the matter was, and even then I thought it possible that he might have merely mislaid them."

" Who besides yourself and Mr. Carling knew of the existence and importance of the papers, and that they were in the house ? "

" Not a soul ! " Sir Robert's tone was absolutely emphatic.

" Not to your knowledge perhaps, Sir Robert ; but someone must certainly have known. Did anyone come into the room while Mr. Carling was engaged on them last night ? "

" No one at all after I left."

" He told you so ? "

" Yes, and Thomson, my confidential servant, confirmed that."

" Does Thomson know of the loss of the papers ? "

" Yes. He is the only one of the servants who does know at present, though the others were questioned—all who were in and out of the room either last night or this morning. Although Carling was positive he placed the papers in the safe, I thought it possible he might

have been mistaken, and that he left them on the table."

"Has he ever made such a mistake before?"

The ghost of a smile flitted across Sir Robert's stern face.

"No, but there would have been considerable excuse if he had been guilty of such carelessness last night. However, he declares that he did put them away, in the same envelope in which they were sent to me—an official one, printed with my name and address. He sealed it."

"About the servants. Are there any foreigners among them?"

"Two only, I believe, both French: the *chef* and Lady Rawson's maid."

"I will see them all in turn, beginning with Thomson. May I ring?"

He put one or two questions to the footman who answered the summons before sending him in search of the valet.

"Who was on duty in the hall last night?"

"I was, sir—till ten, when I went to supper."

"Were there any callers?"

"No, sir."

"Mr. Carling was in this room the whole time?"

"I suppose so, sir. I never saw him come out."

"Did anyone enter the room while Mr. Carling was there?"

"No, sir, only Sir Robert and my lady."

"Who relieved you when you went off duty?"

"Mr. Thomson was in the hall, sir; he was going to wait up for Sir Robert and my lady. Mr. Jenkins, the butler, and some of the others had the evening off, as the family dined out."

"Just so. Will you send Mr. Thomson here?"

In the interval Snell turned to Sir Robert, who had evinced no special interest in the brief colloquy; doubtless he had questioned the man to the same purpose already.

"I suppose Lady Rawson is already aware of the loss of these papers, Sir Robert?"

The query was uttered lightly, as if it was of no importance or significance, but was accompanied by a keen glance at Sir Robert's harassed yet inscrutable face—a glance which again the financier did not meet. He laid down the paper-knife before he answered, in a tone as apparently careless as the detective's had been.

"No. I should have told her, of course, when we came to the conclusion that they really were lost, but she had already gone out. I was to have joined her after lunch, and gone on to Carling's wedding. She will be there now," he added, glancing at the clock on his writing-table.

Snell's eyes glistened. ("Lady Rawson's in this, right enough," he told himself confidently. "And he knows it. He only sent for me as a bit of bluff!")

Thomson entered, and advanced towards his master, ignoring the presence of a second person. At that moment the telephone on the writing-table tinkled, and Thomson stood still, silent and deferential as usual, as, mechanically, Sir Robert took down the receiver.

"Yes? Yes, I am Sir Robert Rawson. Who is speaking? . . . Oh! . . . What's that? . . . What?"

The two who were watching him, more or less furtively, were startled, for he dropped the receiver, stumbled to his feet, and glared round helplessly, a dusky flush rising to his face, which was horribly distorted.

Thomson was by his side in an instant, thrusting a supporting arm around him, but Snell sprang forward, seized the receiver and spoke imperatively into the telephone.

"Who is there? . . . Yes, Sir Robert Rawson was speaking a moment ago, but he has been taken ill."

He glanced at the group close by. Sir Robert had fallen, or been lowered by Thomson to the floor, and the valet was rapidly unloosening his collar.

"Who are you? . . . Oh, it's you, Evans. Western

Division. Yes, I'm John Snell of Scotland Yard. . . . Well, what is it? Lady Rawson murdered! Had she any papers in her possession? . . . What? Right. I'll be with you as soon as possible. Ring off."

"Master, master!" Thomson was stammering. "He's dying!"

Snell pressed the electric bell, and hurried to meet the footman.

"Sir Robert is taken ill; he's had bad news. Lady Rawson has been murdered. Better telephone for a doctor and fetch the housekeeper."

Two minutes later he was speeding westward in a taxi, eager to investigate this sudden and tragic development of the case, for he assumed instantly that the murder was the outcome of the theft of the papers.

At the house in Grosvenor Gardens confusion reigned for a time. The only one among the flurried servants who kept a clear head at this crisis was the imperturbable Thomson, who, after the unwonted outburst of emotion that escaped him as he knelt beside his stricken master, resumed his habitual composure, and promptly took charge of the situation as it affected Sir Robert himself. For the time being he practically ignored the news of the murder, which the others, naturally enough, began discussing with awestruck excitement. Now, as ever, his one thought was his master, and with deft tenderness he did what he thought best—loosening the sufferer's clothes and raising his head. When the doctor arrived Thomson proved an invaluable assistant in every way.

"Will he recover, sir?" he asked, with poignant anxiety, when at length they quitted the room to which Sir Robert had been carried, leaving him still unconscious, but breathing more naturally, and with a trained nurse already in attendance.

"Yes, yes, I hope so; but it was an overwhelming shock, of course. Is this terrible news about Lady Rawson true? It seems incredible."

Thomson passed his hand over his forehead dazedly.

" I suppose it is, sir. I haven't seemed to have time to think about it. It's a terrible upset, and Mr. Carling away and all. There's Lord Warrington. Excuse me, sir. I'd better speak to him."

There were several people in the hall, including a couple of energetic reporters who had managed to enter and were endeavouring to interrogate the worried butler and anyone else whom they could buttonhole, for the news had spread like wildfire, and outside a crowd had assembled, watching and waiting for the grim homecoming of the woman who had left that house but a few hours before in the full vigour of youth and beauty.

Thomson approached a short, spare, but authoritative-looking man, who had just been admitted, and before whom the others gave way respectfully—Lord Warrington of the Foreign Office.

" Will you come in here, my lord ? " he said, and ushered him into the library.

The same young footman whom Snell had questioned hurried forward and detained Thomson for a moment, extending a salver with a heap of letters.

" These have just come by post, Mr. Thomson. Hadn't you better take them ? "

Thomson did so mechanically, and followed Lord Warrington, who turned to him the instant the door was closed.

" This is an awful business, Thomson ! Where's Sir Robert ? "

" In bed, and at death's door, my lord. They telephoned the news to him about my lady, and he had a kind of stroke."

" Good Heavens ! But what does it all mean, man ? What was Lady Rawson doing out there in the suburbs—and murdered in a post office telephone box, of all places in the world ! "

He waved an evening paper he was carrying, and Thomson glanced at it dully.

"I don't know anything about it, my lord, except just that my lady was murdered. The Scotland Yard detective told me that, but I didn't seem to grasp it at the time; I was too distressed about my master, and I've been with him ever since."

"A detective? Did he bring the news?"

"Oh, no, my lord, it was through the telephone. He was here about those papers that are missing——"

"Papers? What papers?"

"Some that arrived by special messenger yesterday, my lord."

Warrington stared aghast.

"Those! He told me about them at dinner. Missing! D'you mean they're lost? Stolen?"

"I thought perhaps you knew, my lord. Mr. Carling put them in the safe last night—or said he did—and this morning they were gone. Sir Robert was very put out, and so was Mr. Carling."

"Gone! Good Lord! I wonder what was in them and who's got hold of them?" muttered Lord Warrington in utter consternation. His glance lighted on the letters that Thomson held.

"What have you got there?"

Thomson looked at them with a preoccupied air.

"Only some letters, my lord, just come. I don't know what to do with them, as Mr. Carling's away."

"Here, give 'em to me—that one anyhow."

'That one' was a big, bulky, blue envelope, printed with Sir Robert's name and address, and showing also the district postmark and a big official stamp indicative of the surcharge for an unpaid letter.

"Where the dickens is Broadway?" Warrington muttered, as he scrutinized it. "Look here, Thomson, I'm going to open this. Why the seal's broken already!"

"Very good, my lord," Thomson murmured deferentially but abstractedly. Yet he looked up with quickened

interest as Lord Warrington uttered an involuntary exclamation.

“ My lord ! They—they’re not those very papers ? ”

“ They are ! By Jove, that’s the queerest thing I’ve ever known ! Now, who the deuce has found and returned them ? ”

CHAPTER VI

"NO. 5339"

"**T**HANK goodness for some peace and quietness at last ! What a day it has been, with everything going wrong from beginning to end ; and then this awful affair about poor Lady Rawson coming on the top of all the other happenings. I shall hate the very thought of a wedding in future ! "

Winnie Winston shivered and spread her hands to the cheerful blaze in the cosy drawing-room of the flat in Chelsea which she shared with her brother George, who sprawled luxuriously in the easy chair opposite her, while between them was Austin Starr, also very much at his ease. He had found time to come round to apologize for his absence at the wedding, and to discuss the startling and mysterious tragedy of Lady Rawson's death. There were very few days when he did not manage to see or converse with Winnie Winston, even if their intercourse was limited to a few sentences hurriedly exchanged over the telephone. He loved her ; from the first moment that he met her he had decided that she was the one woman in the world for him. But he would not ask her to marry, or even to become engaged to him, until he had an assured position to offer her. Meanwhile, though he secretly hoped that she loved him, he could not be certain of that, for her attitude towards him was one of frank camaraderie that reminded him of his own countrywomen. In many ways she was much more like an American than an English girl.

"Don't say that, Miss Winnie. I guess the next wedding will be all right," he responded cheerfully.

"This one wasn't," she declared. "I'm not a bit superstitious—not as a rule—but really I've never known such a succession of misfortunes. First, the fog, and then Roger being late, and the Rawsons not turning up. Mrs. Armitage was so sniffy about that; and of course she never imagined what the reason was. Who *could* imagine anything so horrible? And everything seemed so forlorn after Roger and Grace had gone; it always does somehow, but it was worse than usual to-day. Some of the people were staying—Mrs. Armitage had arranged a theatre party for us all to-night—I wonder if they've gone. I expect so! And she made me sing—you know how fussy she is—and I broke down utterly. Awfully silly of me, I know, but really I couldn't help it. I can't think what 'the *maestro*' would say if he knew it! So I came away: I simply felt I couldn't stay in the house another minute; and there wasn't a cab to be had, so I had to walk to the train; and the rain came on and ruined my new frock, which I meant to wear to-morrow—I'm singing at Æolian Hall in the afternoon."

"Never mind, wear that one you've got on now. You look just lovely in it!" counselled Austin, regarding her with tender admiration.

"That's just like a man!" she laughed, glancing down at her gown; but the laugh had an uncertain ring, with a suggestion of tears in it. "Why, this is ever such an old thing that I only wear at home. But it's not the frock really that I mind. I—I can't help thinking about the horror of it all; poor Lady Rawson being murdered like that, so near to the church, too; she must have been actually on her way to the wedding!"

"I don't think she was," said Austin reflectively, remembering how the murdered woman had been attired when he saw and identified her. "It's a big mystery that will take a lot of unravelling."

"But they've got the chap already," interposed George Winston, reaching for a late edition of an evening paper

that he had just thrown aside—"that taxicab driver. It's as clear as daylight so far. He must have seen Lady Rawson's bag, thought she had something valuable in it, followed and stabbed her, and then made off through the back door, bag and all."

"Queer sort of impulse to seize a highly respectable ex-service man," remarked Starr dryly. "And what was in the bag anyhow, for the contents haven't been found up to now."

"You don't believe he did it?"

Before he could answer, the hall door-bell sounded imperatively, and Winnie started nervously.

"Now, who can that be at this hour!"

An elderly maidservant entered, Martha Stenning, who had grown grey in the Winstons' service.

"It's the same gentleman that called before, Mr. George, and asked to see you or Miss Winnie. He says you wouldn't know his name, but his business is important."

"All right, I'll come, Martha," said George, rising and following her from the room.

"I wonder who it is?" Winnie exclaimed anxiously. "Martha says someone has been ringing up on the telephone several times while we were out, and asking all sorts of questions about——"

They both looked round as George re-entered, followed by Snell, the detective, at sight of whom Starr rose, exclaiming:

"Why, it's you, Mr. Snell! Anything fresh?"

"Not much at present, and I didn't expect to see *you* here, Mr. Starr. Miss Winston? I must ask *you* to excuse my intrusion."

"This is Mr. Snell of Scotland Yard, Winnie," George explained hurriedly. "He says Lady Rawson rang up our number—5339—just before she was murdered. They've got it down in the post office book, and she must have been speaking at the very moment——"

"Lady Rawson! Our number!" gasped Winnie, in utter surprise and perplexity.

"Did you expect to receive a message from her, Miss Winston?" Snell inquired.

"I? Certainly not; why, I've never spoken to her in my life, though I expected to meet her to-day at my friend's wedding. You don't know her either, do you, George?" she added, turning to her brother.

"I've been to her receptions once or twice, but I've never exchanged a dozen words with her," George asserted truthfully. "And I can't imagine why she should have rung us up. I doubt if she even knew that my sister and I were to be at the wedding to-day or that we're old friends of Carling and Miss Armitage—Mrs. Carling I mean, of course."

"Yet Mr. Carling has been on intimate terms—like a member of the family—with Sir Robert and Lady Rawson," Snell remarked.

"With Sir Robert," Winston corrected. "Lady Rawson was always quite kind, I believe; and I know she asked Miss Armitage to her house once or twice; but she never showed any real interest in either of them—no personal friendship, don't you know! At least so I've gathered from Carling," he added, wondering the while what the detective was driving at.

"Then you think it unlikely that, assuming that she wished to speak to Mr. Carling on the telephone, she would expect to find him here?"

"I'm quite sure she wouldn't," said George, and Winnie, nodding a confirmatory assent, added:

"Besides, she wouldn't expect him to be anywhere just then except at the church or on his way there. Not if the time is given rightly in the paper. It said she went into the office about half-past one."

"Just so," Snell agreed, and after a brief pause looked up with a query that at the moment sounded startlingly irrelevant.

"Do you know Signor Cacciola, Miss Winston?"

She stared in astonishment, scarcely grasping the question, especially as he mispronounced the name.

"He's a music master or something of the sort; lives at Rivercourt Mansions West," Snell added.

"Signor Cacciola? Why, of course I know him; he's my singing master—'the *maestro*' we always call him," she answered, knitting her pretty brows in bewilderment, while Austin Starr, watching Snell, screwed his lips in the form of whistling, and listened intently for what might follow.

"He comes here often?"

"Yes. At least he does when he is coaching me for a special concert or anything like that. He has been here every morning this week except to-day."

"You did not expect him to-day?"

"No. I was going to the wedding; and besides, he has an engagement every Thursday—at Blackheath, I think."

"You know him well? Have you known him long?"

"For several years—ever since he came to London. He is a dear old man."

"An Italian?"

"Yes, though he has not been in Italy for many years."

"He took a keen interest in Russian affairs," Snell asserted.

"Did he? I'm sure I don't know. He certainly never talked about such things to me."

"Did he ever speak to you of Lady Rawson?"

"Never!"

It was impossible to doubt Winnie's emphatic negative. Again he shifted his point, or appeared to do so.

"Then you can't give me any reason why Lady Rawson should have rung you up to-day?"

"None at all, unless she gave a wrong number and it happened by chance to be ours."

"That's just what I think," exclaimed George.

"It might have been so," Snell assented. "I've known

a good many coincidences as queer. Well, I'm very sorry to have troubled you so late, Miss Winston, and I must thank you for answering me so clearly. Some folks beat about the bush and are scared out of their senses at the very sight of a detective—when they know him as such," he added, with a smile. "But we're bound to get whatever information we can, even at the risk of worrying people who really haven't anything to do with the case. And now I'll take myself off."

"Have a whisky-and-soda first," urged George Winston hospitably. "Of course we know you have to look up every point, and if we'd guessed the reason why we've been rung up so often to-day we should have been expecting you—or someone else on the same errand."

Snell declined the proffered refreshment, but accepted a cigarette, and lingered for a minute or two, chatting in a casual manner on the subject that was uppermost in all their minds.

George questioned him about the suspected man, Sadler, the taxicab driver.

"He's doing all right ; not as much hurt as was thought at first, and he'll probably be able to attend the opening of the inquest to-morrow. But we haven't been able to interrogate him yet; in fact he doesn't know he's under arrest."

"Do you believe he did it ?" demanded George.

"I never form an opinion on slight evidence," Snell replied guardedly. "Good night, Miss Winston, good night, sir. Many thanks. Are you coming with me, Mr. Starr ?"

Starr shook his head.

"I guess I shan't get anything out of you if I do, Mr. Snell."

Snell smiled enigmatically.

"Yet I've given you a lot just now, Mr. Starr, though I doubt if you'll be able to make much of it in time for to-morrow's 'Courier.'"

"What did he mean by that ?" whispered Winnie, as her brother accompanied the unexpected guest to the door.

"I'll tell you to-morrow. I'm going to follow it up, right now, as he surmises. There are no flies on Mr. Snell! Good night, Miss Winnie."

In a minute or so George returned to the room.

"My hat! This is queer experience, isn't it, Win? I say, let's try and get on to the 'Lord Warden' and speak to Roger. He'll be awfully anxious to know about everything; there's a lot in the late editions too that he won't be able to see down there to-night."

"Oh, you can't ring him up at this hour," Winnie protested, glancing at the clock. "Besides, it would frighten Grace if she knew. You said Roger was going to keep it from her."

"I'm going to ring him up," George insisted. "It's not really late—not for Roger anyhow. It's only just on eleven."

Winnie let him have his way, not choosing to urge the various reasons against it that occurred at once to her quick feminine mind, but escaped her brother's obtuse one.

In a surprisingly short time for a "trunk call" the telephone bell tinkled its summons, and George went out into the little hall to answer it.

The colloquy was very brief, and as George hurriedly re-entered she looked up with a whimsical "I told you so" expression on her pretty face, which fled as she saw his agitated aspect.

"I say, Win, they're not there!"

"Not there!" she ejaculated, starting up.

"Haven't been there at all. They must be crossing by the night boat after all; such a beastly night too—half a gale and raining cats and dogs. It's worse there than it is here. I asked."

"Crossing *to-night*! And Grace is the worst sailor imaginable. What on earth possessed Roger to take her?"

"He must be mad—mad as a hatter!" cried George, but the same thought and explanation occurred to him as to Winnie, and their eyes met in a glance of mutual horror and consternation.

CHAPTER VII

THE CIGARETTE CASE

FROM Chelsea, Austin Starr went direct to Rivercourt Mansions, a quadrangular block of flats, standing back from the high road and fronting a square of grass and trees.

He dismissed his cab at the entrance to the square, which he noted was nearly opposite to the post office where Lady Rawson had been done to death a few hours before. He stood for a minute, regardless of the drizzling rain, staring across the thoroughfare, almost deserted on this dreary night. He imagined the illfated woman crossing it, with the assassin dogging her footsteps. Who was that assassin, and what was his motive? He was already certain in his own mind that the taxi-driver was as innocent of the crime as he was himself, although he had undoubtedly been close at hand at the time. And why had Lady Rawson visited Cacciola at his flat, and failing to find him there tried to ring him up at the Winstons'? He meant to discover that right now, if possible, feeling instinctively that here was the clue to the mystery. He guessed that Snell was already in possession of that clue, and had racked his brains in conjecture concerning it as he drove hither. But, though he had been with Snell all the afternoon, that astute individual had maintained silence concerning the stolen dispatches. He did not intend Starr or any other pressman to know of them at present. There were cases when he was glad to avail himself of the assistance of the Press, but this was not one of them. Already, thanks to a lucky accident—lucky from his point

of view—he was in possession of evidence which he considered of the utmost importance, and on which he was building up a certain theory, which so far appeared to have very few flaws in it.

A tram came clanking along the road and Austin Starr turned away along the side-walk, glancing up at the Mansions. Most of the windows were dark, but there were lights here and there. One shone cheerily from a window high up in the block he wanted. As he reached the entrance the lights in the hall and on the staircase went out, and in the sudden darkness he collided with a man in the doorway who accosted him with facetious apology.

"Sorry, Mr. 'Catch'-old-o'-you.' If I'd seen you coming I'd have waited till you got up. Half a minute, and I'll switch on again."

He suited the action to the word, and Austin saw he was the porter, a small, spare man with a sharp-featured, whimsical face.

"It's all right," Starr assured him, "I'm going up to Mr. Cacciola's. The top flat, isn't it? I guess he's home, for there's a light in the window."

"I don't think he is, sir, he's mostly later than this; but old Julia will be sitting up for him. Are you Mr. Roger Carling, by any chance, sir?"

Austin Starr was considerably startled, though he made no sign beyond a penetrating glance at his interrogator, and answered quietly:

"No, but I'm his intimate friend. What made you take me for him?"

"Beg pardon, sir, I'm sure. I don't know the gentleman, but I saw the name on the cigarette case he dropped outside Mr. 'Catch'-old-o'-you's' door this morning. I always call the old gentleman that—nearest I can get to his name—and he don't mind a bit, not he! Julia's got the case all right—she's Mr. 'Catch'-old-o'-you's' house-keeper; Italian same as him, and a good old sort. I thought perhaps you were Mr. Carling come after it."

Austin saw and interpreted aright a slight and significant crook of the little man's fingers and produced a coin.

"So you found the case?" he remarked pleasantly. "Mr. Carling will be glad to know it. I guess he hadn't a notion where he dropped it. He's left town to-day—on his honeymoon."

"Thank you, sir, though I'm sure I didn't expect anything," responded the little man, promptly pocketing the tip. "Gone on his honeymoon, has he? Why, he's never the gentleman that was married at St. Paul's to-day—the wedding that poor lady was on her way to when she was murdered? They didn't give his name in the paper, I saw. Terrible thing, isn't it, sir? And will you believe me, I never heard a word about it till nigh on tea-time! It must have 'appened just after I went to my dinner: I was a bit late to-day; had to take a parcel up to No. 20—that's when I found the cigarette case; and if only I'd been about I might 'ave seen it all. And to think of young Charlie Sadler doing such a nawful thing. He must 'ave gone clean off his nut!"

"You know him?" asked Starr quickly, thankful that the garrulous little man had strayed from the subject of Roger Carling's presence so near the scene of the tragedy, though at the moment he was unable to analyse his thought sufficiently to know why he should feel thankful.

"Know Charlie Sadler? Why, I've known him ever since he was a little nipper so high. Lives with his mother—a decent old soul—down in Milsom Cottages, and he's courting little Jessie Jackson over at the post office, on the sly, for her aunt, Mrs. Cave, don't think him good enough for her; and it seems she's right after all. But whoever would 'ave thought of 'im going and doing a murder like that?"

"We don't know yet that he did it," said Starr.

"Well, of course it'll 'ave to be proved against him; but if he didn't, then who did? That's the question. And he was there right enough. Slipped in by the side

door to see Jessie while her aunt was safe in the shop, and when the girl was called down he must 'ave seen the lady and been taken with one of these 'ere sudden temptations; and then when he found what he'd done he 'ooked it, and smashed up the cab and himself in his 'urry. There it is in a nutshell, sir!" Withers concluded triumphantly. Evidently he had been gossiping pretty freely during the evening, but as evidently he as yet knew nothing of Lady Rawson's visit to Cacciola's flat—if, indeed, she had been there—and attached no significance to Roger Carling's visit. How should he?

"Perhaps you're right," Starr conceded. "We'll all have just to 'wait and see' anyhow. Well, I'll go up——"

"I'm sure Mr. 'Catch-'old-o'-you's' not in yet, sir; but I'll give him any message for you in the morning," suggested Withers officiously.

"No, thanks, I'll leave it with Julia if necessary. Good night."

"Good night, sir, and thank you. I'll keep the lights on till you've got to the top."

Starr thanked him again and went upstairs—eight flights of them—outwardly composed, inwardly more perturbed than he had ever been in his life before. His mind was in a dark tumult of suspicion and perplexity, which would have been increased if he could have known the news George Winston had just learnt from Dover—that Roger and Grace were not at the "Lord Warden."

"It's impossible! He can't have had anything to do with it!" he told himself impatiently, refusing even to formulate the suspicion that had arisen in his mind. Yet the suspicion was there.

The lights below went out as he pressed the bell button at No. 19, but an instant later one flashed up within the hall of the flat and he heard a soft shuffle of slipped feet. But the door was not opened to him. The letter slit moved and through the aperture a woman's voice demanded, in good enough English, though with a strong foreign accent:

"Who is zere?"

He responded with a counter-question:

"Is Mr. Cacciola at home?"

"He is not. He vill perhaps not return to-night. Who are you?"

"I reckon you won't know my name. You're Julia, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am Giulia. Vat ees it?"

"Open the door, there's a good soul, and I'll tell you. I can't shout it through. It's important."

"I do not know you," she protested nervously after a pause. "You are from the police again?"

So, as he guessed, Snell had already been here. He wondered that the loquacious porter had not seen him and scented the errand.

"Yes," he lied boldly. "So you'd better open the door right now. You've nothing to fear from me, and I shan't keep you many minutes."

She muttered something that he could not catch, but a chain clanked, and a moment later she opened the door a few inches and peered out—a short, plump old woman, whose comely brown face and lustrous black eyes wore a strained, anxious expression, that relaxed a little as she eyed her visitor.

His appearance seemed to reassure her, for she drew back and motioned him to enter the little square hall.

He smiled at her, and there were few women, young or old, who could resist Austin Starr's smile. He had what some folk term "a way with him," all the more effective since it was exerted unconsciously.

"It's real good of you, signora, to admit me at this unholy hour, and I'll not keep you any time," he began diplomatically. "First, I want that cigarette case that Mr. Roger Carling lost on your lobby this morning. The porter says he gave it to you."

"The leetle case? But I have it not! I gave it to the officer of police—he who came to-day, saying he was

of the police, though he wore no uniform; he was like yourself, signor," she stammered.

Starr's heart sank. The moment he had heard of that cigarette case he determined to get possession of it, and if possible prevent any knowledge of it reaching the police, though again he did not attempt to analyse his motive.

"I have done wrong in giving it him?" Giulia continued uneasily.

"Not a bit of it, signora—that's all right," Starr answered, with a cheerfulness he was very far from feeling. "I haven't seen Mr. Snell since or he'd have told me you had it. I guess you've told him about everything else too, but I'll have to trouble you to tell me also. The *maestro* left home as usual to go to his class at Blackheath. What time did he go out?"

"At a leetle after nine, signor."

"You're sure he was going to Blackheath?"

"Ah, yes, signor. Vere else would he go?"

"When did Lady Rawson come?"

"In a ver' leetle time after the *maestro* go. He could scarce have reach the stazione."

"So early! Then she knew he would not be back. Why did she return?"

Giulia hesitated.

"I do not comprehend," she muttered.

"When did she go away?"

"I do not remember."

"Come, that's nonsense, signora. You must know; try to think. She was here after one o'clock, we know that; in fact, she went straight from here to the post office where she was murdered."

Giulia stood speechless, plucking nervously at her white apron, and as he saw her embarrassment an idea flashed to his mind.

"Great Scot! She was here the whole morning: she came in and waited. That's so?"

She nodded a reluctant assent.

"She was here when Mr. Carling called just after one. Did he ask for her?"

Again Giulia nodded.

"Did he see her?"

She shook her head.

"She did not vish it. I said she was not here. It was a lie, and I do not like lies; but she would have it so; and he go away. She look from the window, and vatch till he pass the corner, and then she go away also."

Starr stood musing for a space, and, master of his emotions though he was, Giulia's keen old eyes detected a certain expression of relief on his face.

He was inwardly reproaching himself also for part at least of the suspicion that had assailed him the instant he learnt that Carling had been there. He thought he knew Roger Carling as thoroughly as one man can know another, believed him to be the soul of honour and rectitude. But he also knew that in every human being there are depths that none other can plumb; and, remembering the circumstances, the thought had occurred involuntarily that some shameful secret might be the cause and explanation of the mysterious tragedy.

It was such an obvious solution. Lady Rawson, young, beautiful, extraordinarily attractive, married to a man almost old enough to be her grandfather and meeting every day one of her own age, handsome and debonair as was Carling. Dangerous conditions enough, human nature being what it is! And Carling would not be the first good man to be fascinated and entangled by an unscrupulous woman, even while he loved another woman—as Roger loved Grace—with all the strength of his better nature.

But that idea might be dismissed, so far as Carling was concerned as a principal in the matter anyhow. Lady Rawson had not come here to meet him, had not expected or wished to see him when he followed her there.

Yet if Lady Rawson did not come here to meet Carling,

whom did she come to see—whom did she wait for all those hours? Not old Cacciola, certainly, for she learnt at once that he was out for the day. He turned to Giulia and put the question point blank.

“Who was here this morning with you and Lady Rawson?”

“No one; nevere any person at all!” she cried emphatically.

“But you expected someone; that was why Lady Rawson waited.”

She shook her head, but her eyes did not meet his, and her hands were trembling as she still fidgeted with her apron.

“Zere vas no one, zere nevere has been no one; I have told all, signor.”

He found it was useless to question her further, and decided that he would not wait on the chance of learning anything from Cacciola. He gathered that the old man seldom returned till long after midnight.

Groping his way down the dark staircase, he reached the high road just in time to board a tram going eastwards, which set him down at the terminus within a few hundred yards from the hospital to which Sadler had been taken. He might as well call and inquire as to the man's condition. If there was anything to report there was still time to telephone to the office.

A minute later he pushed back the swing-door and entered the lobby of the hospital, to find himself face to face with Snell.

CHAPTER VIII

AT CACCIOLA'S

SNELL greeted Austin with a smile and a significant cock of his left eyebrow.

"You haven't lost any time, Mr. Starr. But there's nothing fresh here. Sadler's just the same, and the doctor says it will be impossible for him to attend the inquest to-morrow, so we shall ask for a week's adjournment. And he won't be allowed to be 'interviewed' by anyone," he added pointedly.

"I guessed that, of course. I only meant to inquire how he was. I take it he's practically under arrest?"

"Not at all. Under surveillance perhaps, which is a very different matter. And the less said about that or *anything else* the better for the present, Mr. Starr. No 'stunts' in this case, please. Well, did you find Cacciola at home? Or old Julia amiable?"

"How did you know I'd been there?"

"Guessed it, knowing you. That's meant as a compliment."

"Cacciola hadn't returned. I know him fairly well, having seen him a good few times at Miss Winston's. And Giulia was civil enough, though she seemed a bit scared. She told me some yarn about a cigarette case she had found."

As they spoke in guarded tones, they had reissued from the hospital and now stood on the steps, where the lamp-light fell full on Snell's face. Starr's keen eyes were fixed on it, but it revealed nothing.

"A cigarette case? Whose was it?" asked Snell.

"Don't you know? You've got it, haven't you?"

Starr strove to speak in a casual tone, but it was difficult to control his voice. Of all the many sensational cases he had come across this was the first that had touched him personally, and the horrible fear that Roger Carling might in some way be mixed up in it, and that Snell knew it, was still strong upon him.

"Are you trying to cross-examine me?" asked the detective dryly.

Possibly for the first time in his life under such circumstances Austin lost his self-possession.

"See here, Snell, what's the use of fencing?" he asked hotly. "You've got that case right enough. It's Rog——"

"Stop!" interrupted Snell imperatively, though without raising his voice. "I've mentioned no name. Take my advice, Mr. Starr, and don't you mention one either. I've told you already that the less said the better, and if you can't take the hint—well, that's your affair."

Austin bit his lip, inwardly cursing himself for his indiscretion. If he had held his tongue about his knowledge of Roger Carling's movements he might, sooner or later, have got some hint of what was in the detective's mind. Now, in all probability he would get no further information at all.

"Sorry," he muttered somewhat ungraciously. "You're right, of course. But——"

"But there's nothing to add to your story to-night. Take my word for it," said Snell, with restored good humour. "Which way are you going? Tube? I'm for the tram. What a beastly night! I shan't be sorry to get indoors."

"Nor I," Austin confessed with a shiver.

Almost in silence they walked side by side through the chill drizzle to the station, and there parted, Snell crossing to the tram terminus.

But he was not yet bound for home, as he had allowed

and wished Starr to infer. Tireless and relentless as a sleuth-hound, he believed he was already fairly on the track of Lady Rawson's murderer, but there were certain preliminary points he wished to clear up, and till he succeeded in that there would be no rest for him.

The tram was crowded with returning theatre-goers, most of whom were discussing the grim crime and the reports in the late editions of the evening papers. None guessed how intimately the wiry little man in the drenched Burberry, meekly strap-hanging among them, was concerned with it, and quite a number alighted from the tram when he did, opposite the post office, and lingered in the rain staring at the house of tragedy, now dark and silent as a grave, with a solitary policeman standing guard, and in a subdued, monotonous voice requesting the whispering crowd to "Pass along, please."

Snell did not even glance at the house or the sentinel, but disappeared into the darkness of the square nearly opposite, three sides of which were occupied by the tall blocks of flats known as "Rivercourt Mansions," fronted by shrubberies, and with more shrubs and trees in the centre: a pleasant place enough in daylight, but gloomy and mysterious on this miserable wet midnight. Treading as lightly as a cat in his "silent-soled" shoes, Snell walked swiftly to the end of the square, and paused, to be joined immediately by a man in a dark mackintosh, who emerged from the shadow of the shrubs.

"Anything to report, Evans?" Snell asked softly.

"He hasn't returned yet, sir. Mr. Starr went in and stayed a good few minutes, just after ten-thirty."

"I know. Did he see you?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Anything else?"

"A good many have come and gone—people living in the block; but none that I could spot as on this business."

Together they withdrew into deeper gloom again, and in dead silence waited and watched. Not for long.

Another tram clanked westward, halted, went on, and a minute later footsteps approached—heavy, weary, dragging footsteps; and the figures of two men passed into the radius of light from the street lamp nearest the watchers.

"That's the signor—the fat one," Snell's subordinate whispered. "The other's the Russian."

"Come on," said Snell, and silently they followed the two men, overtaking them as Cacciola was inserting a latchkey into the outer door of the block where he lived.

He turned with a start as Snell courteously accosted him.

"Signor Cacciola? I have been waiting your return, and must have a few words with you to-night concerning the late Lady Rawson. If you will look at my card you will know who I am and that my business is urgent."

As he spoke he switched on his electric torch, handed the card to Cacciola, and watched the old man's face as he read it—a plump, olive-complexioned, usually jolly face that now looked drawn and grief-stricken.

"By all means; enter, signor," said Cacciola with grave dignity. "I—we—will give you all the assistance possible. You are not alone?" he added, narrowing his dark eyes in an endeavour to pierce the gloom beyond the circle of light.

"No. But perhaps you will permit my man to wait in your hall for me," returned Snell blandly.

He did not anticipate danger, but anything might happen in that top flat, and, though he was courageous enough, he never took unnecessary risks.

"But certainly. Lead the way, Boris. Will you continue the light, signor? The stairs are very dark—and long."

With hushed footsteps, and no sound beyond Cacciola's heavy breathing, they stole in procession up the staircase, Evans bringing up the rear just behind Snell.

As they reached the top landing the door of Cacciola's

flat opened, and Giulia appeared on the threshold, a dark figure against the lighted hall, began to speak volubly in Italian, and then, seeing her master's companions, and recognizing Snell, stopped short and retreated a pace or two, glancing nervously from one to the other.

"It's all right, ma'am. No cause for alarm," said Snell reassuringly. "I've been here before to-day, sir, in your absence, as I expect she was trying to tell you. Let her tell her story now, it will help us. And in English, please, as I don't understand your language."

"She shall do so. Come with us, Giulia. Take off your wet coats, my friends."

Cacciola led the way into a large, comfortable room where a gas fire glowed cosily—a musician's room, with the place of honour occupied by a magnificent grand piano.

The Russian, who had not spoken a word, and moved like a man in a dream, allowed Cacciola to remove his dripping overcoat and push him into an easy chair. He was a delicate-looking, handsome-featured young man, who seemed, and was, dazed with grief and horror.

Rapidly, but quite coherently, Giulia poured out her story in broken English, frequently lapsing into Italian, to be as frequently, though gently, checked by her master. Much of it was already known to Snell, but there were one or two fresh and illuminative points.

"La Donna Paula," the name by which the old woman designated Lady Rawson, had come quite early, soon after the *maestro's* departure, demanding to see Signor Boris, who was away, Giulia did not know where. Then she telephoned to Blackheath, in the hope of speaking to the *maestro*, and learnt he was not expected there to-day, and presently she tried to telephone again, but lo! the instrument would not serve—it was out of order!

("So that's why she went to the call office," Snell mentally commented, having already noticed the telephone on a table beside the piano.)

Donna Paula appeared very impatient, also agitated,

and when the bell rang bade Giulia deny that she was or had been there, if one should ask for her, and, of a verity, the young signor who came did so, and ask oh, very many questions.

"Did he tell you his name?" interposed Snell.

"But no, signor. Yet I learnt it later, for soon after Donna Paula had gone, the *portaire* ring and give me a little silver case he find, with a name on it that I forget, for then the signor there come, and I give him the case, and he have it now, and he tell me Donna Paula have been murdered, and I know not what to do or to say, but I wait and wait for you or Signor Boris, and no one come till late, so late, when yet another signor arrive, and say he also is of the police and ask for the little silver case, and I tell him I have it not. That is the truth—you have the case still, signor?"

She whirled round towards Snell, who spoke soothingly.

"Yes, yes, that's all right, signora. Nobody's blaming you for anything, and you've told your story admirably. Thank you very much. And now, sir, if you please, we'll have our chat."

"Go, my good Giulia," said Cacciola, "and be not so distressed, though, indeed, we are all cut to the heart. Now, signor?"

"I want you to tell me everything you know about Lady Rawson—you and this gentleman, who, I think, were on terms of intimate friendship with the unfortunate lady."

It was no chance shot. Hours ago he had searched Lady Rawson's rooms, and in her boudoir, hidden in the secret drawer of a costly antique writing-table, had found a big packet of letters, some of quite recent date, written in Russian. They were all signed merely with the initial "B," and those which he had got translated at once gave him a fair inkling of the relations between the writer and the dead woman. The translation of the others would be in his hands to-morrow morning.

If the Russian heard and understood the words he made

no sign. He sat huddled in the chair where Cacciola had placed him, with one hand over his eyes. He might have been asleep for any movement that he made.

"It is but very little I can tell," said Cacciola. "It is true that she came here from time to time—not to see me, to see her cousin, my dear pupil Boris Melikoff here, who has been in the North since three days, and returned to-night only, to hear of this deed of horror. It has overwhelmed him, as you see. He is utterly exhausted. One moment——"

Rising, he opened a corner cupboard, brought out a decanter half filled with wine, and some glasses, placed them on a table at Snell's elbow, and filled one glass.

"This may revive him, and I think we all need it. I pray you help yourself and your friend, signor. It is good wine, I give you my word," he added with a courteous gesture.

Crossing to Melikoff, he touched him, speaking caressingly as one would speak to a sick child.

"Rouse yourself, *caro*, and drink. It is I, *maestro*, who implore you. The signor is here to learn the truth, and you must aid him."

Melikoff obeyed, and, after an instant's hesitation, Snell accepted Cacciola's invitation, poured out a glass of wine for himself and passed one to Evans with an affirmative nod.

The old man was right. It was jolly good wine, and jolly well they all needed it!

"That is better, eh?" said Cacciola, emptying and setting down his own glass, and looking with anxious affection at Boris, who sat upright and turned his brilliant, haggard eyes on Snell.

"You want to know—what?" he asked in perfect English, and in a low, singularly musical voice, tense with repressed emotion.

"Everything you can tell me concerning Lady Rawson, whom the signor here says was your cousin. Is that so?"

"That is so. But I can tell you nothing more."

"Come, come, Mr. Melikoff. That won't do!" Snell retorted, more sternly than he had yet spoken. "I am in possession of many of your recent letters to her, and am aware of their contents. Do you understand me?"

"No," said Melikoff curtly.

"Then I must try to make you."

"You think I murdered her!" cried the Russian, with more vehemence than a moment before he had seemed capable of. "I, who would have given my life, my soul, to save her!"

"Nothing of the kind. I might have done so if I hadn't happened to know that your friend here spoke the truth when he said you were away—miles away from here—at the time. But it's my duty to discover who *did* murder the unfortunate lady, and if you don't choose to give me any information you can that may assist me, here and now, you'll only have it wrung from you later in cross-examination. So please yourself!"

"He is right—you must tell him all you know, my son," interposed Cacciola. "I myself know so little," he added plaintively to Snell. "They have always kept me—how do you call it?—in the dark, these two unhappy ones."

"Well, while Mr. Melikoff makes up his mind as to whether he's going to say anything or nothing to-night, Signor Cacciola, perhaps you'll explain just what your association with them both was, and why her ladyship came here, more or less disguised, so often?"

The old man flung out his hands with a deprecating gesture.

"I know so little," he repeated distressfully. "At least of Milady Rawson—Donna Paula as we call her. I love him—Boris—as if he were my son. I learn to know him first, oh, many years since, in Russia, when he was a little boy, with the voice of an angel. Though quite untrain, signor, he sing like the birds of the air! And I say to him then, and to his mother, the countess, 'He

shall come to me in good time, and I make him the greatest singer in the whole world.' And at last he came——"

"When?"

"But two years since, signor; and the good saints guided him to me, for he did not mean to come. He had escape with the bare life from his unhappy country, having fought in the Great War, and then against the Red Terror, till all was lost—all, all swept away. He was at the gate of death when I find him and bring him home here so joyfully, and Giulia and I nurse him back to health, and I begin to train him, or I try, for the voice is there, signor, beautiful as ever, but the desire to sing—alas!"

He shrugged his shoulders, and again threw up his hands with an expressive gesture.

"He doesn't want to go in for singing now?" asked Snell, with a swift glance at the Russian, who had relapsed into his former attitude. Yet the detective believed he was listening to the colloquy.

"That is so, signor. It is my great grief. I tell him it is wrong to waste the gift of God; I tell him music is a great and a jealous mistress that demands all devotion—that the singer should have no country, no other love, no other mistress than his art!"

"H'm! And where does Lady Rawson come in?" asked Snell dryly, mindful of those letters.

Cacciola hesitated and glanced uneasily at Melikoff. Hitherto his manner had been engagingly frank; now it changed, became guarded, even furtive.

"It is so—so difficult," he said slowly. "They are cousins—yes. They had not met for years; he thought she had perished, like so many—so many, until he found she was here in England, married to the great Sir Rawson."

"When did he find that out? Before or after he came to you?"

"After—many weeks after he recover. I was glad—and sorry: glad that one whom he loved still lived, sorry——"

"Go on, sir—sorry because?"

"It is so difficult," Cacciola murmured, with another appealing glance at Boris.

"Did Sir Robert know of their connexion?"

Cacciola shook his head.

"Did he ever go to see her in her own house?"

Again the mute negative.

"So they used to meet here, in your flat, in secret?"

"It was not my wish," Cacciola muttered, his distress increasing under interrogation.

"And they were engaged in some Russian plot. Were there any others in it? Who made this their meeting place?"

"I do not——"

Cacciola's faltering denial was cut short, for Melikoff sprang to his feet and confronted Snell, who also rose.

"Enough!" cried the Russian. "The *maestro* is right—he does not know! And there was—there is—no plot as you call it, save that she and I, like many others of our race, were always waiting and watching, and hoping for some means of serving our unhappy country. Also, we loved each other—yes! But I swear to you it was love without one taint of dishonour to her, to me, to that old man, her husband!"

Was he speaking the truth in this respect? Snell, with his wide knowledge of poor human nature, and mentally comparing this handsome, passionate, emotional youth with Sir Robert—old, formal, pompous!—greatly doubted it.

But the point did not interest him except as it might afford some clue to the mystery. It was not his job to make inquisition into anyone's morals.

"Did you expect Lady Rawson to visit you to-day?" he asked.

"No. How could I? It is two weeks—more—since I have even seen her. I had to go to Birmingham——"

"On my affairs—there is no secret about that," interposed Cacciola, but neither heeded him.

"I did not send word to her of my journey—you know that, if you have—her—letters, as you say," Boris continued. "I do not know why she came to-day—to meet her death!"

"She came to give or show you some important and secret papers which she stole from her husband's safe this morning," said Snell bluntly.

"So? I know nothing of that."

"But someone knew. Those papers were in her hand-bag, which was snatched from her by the person who followed and stabbed her, and has since been found empty. Now, do you know of anyone whatsoever, man or woman, who would be likely to know or guess that she had those papers in her possession?"

"Of our people? None! Was she not one of us—the most trusted, the most beloved? Not one of *us* would have harmed a hair of her head! Wait—let me think. They were her husband's papers——"

For some seconds he stood knitting his dark brows, then, very slowly:

"There is one man. Her husband's secretary——"

"Do you know him?"

"I have never seen him, but his name is Car—Carling!"

"Were they enemies?"

"No, not openly; but she feared him. She thought he—watched her. *Mon Dieu!* The man who came here to-day, as Giulia said, and asked for her. That was the man! I will find him! I will kill him!"

His haggard young face was terrible to see in the frenzy of hatred that distorted it; his slender hands moved convulsively as though he already felt his fingers clutching Roger Carling's throat. Cacciola seized one arm, Snell the other, and he collapsed under their grasp, and fell into the chair, sobbing like a woman or like a man who has been shot.

"It is too much for him!" cried Cacciola. "Boris, Boris. Courage, my child!"

"Poor chap!" said Snell. "I won't worry him any more, nor you either to-night, sir. And I must ask you to keep silence for the present. You'll be worried by a horde of inquirers—journalists especially—for the next few days, but you tell your old Julia to lock the door. Don't you see anyone, and take care he doesn't."

"You may trust us, signor," said the old man.

"Then, good night, sir. Come on, Evans."

CHAPTER IX

BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM

EVEN a short railway journey often has the effect of creating an interval that means far longer than the actual lapse of time—a honeymoon journey perhaps most of all, marking, as it does, the turning point, the beginning of a new epoch in two young lives.

Therefore, by the time Roger and his bride arrived at Dover he had not only recovered his equanimity, but the extraordinary events of the morning, and even the grim and startling news he had learned at the moment of departure had receded far away, like the remembrance of an evil dream. The only thing that really mattered was the great and wonderful fact that he and Grace were together, and would be henceforth not only, as the beautiful words in which they had so lately plighted their solemn troth declared, "till death us do part," but, as all true lovers hope and believe, together in spirit for all eternity—"out beyond into the dream to come."

The proud, tender, protective air with which he assisted Grace to alight, the radiant happiness of their young faces, were instantly "spotted" by the nearest porter, who bustled up in cheery anticipation of a noble tip.

"Two cabin trunks, kit-bag, and two hat-boxes in the van—very good, sir," said he, taking possession of Grace's dressing case and travelling rugs. "What are they like? New?"

"Oh, no! quite old. We'll point them out," said Grace with demure dignity, and shot an adorable glance

at Roger as they followed the man, threading their way through the crowd on the platform.

They had decided to avoid any brand-new appearance, fondly imagining thereby that they would pass as an "old married couple"—as though any such device could conceal their blissful state from even the least observant of onlookers!

They halted behind an opulent-looking couple, the man smoking a huge cigar, the lady shrilly claiming a whole pile of trunks as they were bundled out of the van, and Grace, with a little gasp of dismay, clutched Roger's sleeve and drew him aside.

"Oh, look, Roger!" she whispered, "there are the Fosters, and they're putting up at the 'Lord Warden'!"

"Well, what about it, darling?"

"We're bound to meet them, and I do dislike them so and wouldn't let mother ask them to the wedding; we had quite a scene about it, and Daddy backed me up. They *are* such impossible people. It *will* be so awkward. Can't we dodge them?"

"Of course we can—nothing easier. We'll lie low till they clear off and then go to the Grand."

So they did, and once safe in the taxi laughed gaily over the narrow escape, little imagining what a sinister significance would soon be attached to their impulsive change of plan.

He waited in the lounge while Grace was upstairs unpacking and dinner was being laid in the private sitting-room he had secured. As it happened there were very few people staying in the hotel, and for the moment he had the place to himself.

He ordered a whisky-and-soda, and with it the attendant brought an evening paper.

"Just come down, sir. There's been a horrible murder of a lady in London."

So it was impossible to escape from the tragedy that haunted him on this, his wedding day.

He took the paper without comment, glanced at it, and laid it aside. It was the same edition that George Winstone had thrust into his hands at Victoria. For a minute or more he sat in painful thought, then, leaving his glass untouched, went through to the office and gave the Grosvenor Gardens telephone number for a trunk call.

"I'll call you, sir; it may be some time getting through."

"All right. I'll be in the lounge."

But within a couple of minutes the summons came, and, hastily finishing his drink, he hurried to the box.

Thomson's voice sounded, civil, precise, distinct, as usual. At the telephone as in most other respects Sir Robert's trusted attendant was admirable, unimpeachable.

"Hullo, Thomson! Carling speaking. I've just arrived at Dover and seen the awful news. Where is Sir Robert?"

"In bed, sir, and still unconscious, though the doctors say that is all the better under the circumstances. In fact, I believe he is under an opiate. He had a sort of stroke, sir, when he heard—by telephone—of her ladyship's death."

"How on earth did it happen—the—the murder I mean? I've only seen the bare announcement."

"In a call-box, sir. If I may be permitted to state an opinion" (agitated though he was, Roger smiled at the formal phraseology, so entirely characteristic of old Thomson), "her ladyship was followed by someone who imagined she had valuables in her bag—a large and very handsome one—struck her down, and then finding those papers in it, and not knowing how to get rid of them, just put them into a pillar box, so that they came back to Sir Robert——"

"What! What papers?" Roger shouted into the transmitter, scarcely able to believe he had heard aright. "Not those we were searching for this morning?"

"The same, I understand, sir. They were delivered, surcharged, by the five o'clock post, and as Lord Warrington happened to be here, inquiring for Sir Robert,

I made bold to give them to his lordship, who has taken charge of them."

"What wonderful, what incredible luck!" exclaimed Roger, forgetting for the moment the grim central circumstance, and was ashamed next instant, especially as Thomson's voice sounded distinctly severe and shocked:

"I fear it cost her ladyship her life, sir."

"You're right, Thomson. The whole thing is too terrible, and I oughtn't to have spoken like that. But it is a relief to know that the papers, at least, are safe. They are tremendously important. But, look here, Thomson, is there anything I can do? I am terribly concerned and anxious about Sir Robert. Do you think I ought to come back to town to-morrow, or—or even to-night? I don't *want* to, of course, and, if possible, I shall keep the news from—Mrs. Carling—till the morning——"

There was a little pause—only a few seconds, though it seemed longer—before Thomson replied:

"I don't think it should be at all necessary, sir. I'm sure you can do nothing for Sir Robert at present; the doctors do not anticipate any immediate danger."

"Well, I'll ring you up in the morning then."

"Very good, sir. I hope you will not consider it presumptuous of me to express my deep regret that these terrible occurrences should have marred your wedding day, and to convey my respectful wishes to you and your good lady?"

"Presumptuous! Good Lord, no! It's very kind of you, Thomson. Many thanks," said Roger, again smiling involuntarily. "Well, if Sir Robert should ask for me, tell him you're in touch with me."

"I will, sir. Good night, sir."

"Good night."

Only after he had replaced the receiver did he remember that he had not told Thomson where he was speaking from, but decided it wasn't worth while putting another call through. For to-night at least he would not be

wanted, and he would strive to dismiss the whole tragedy from his mind. What a queer old stick Thomson was, but a good sort too! And that astounding news of the recovery of the papers was very reassuring.

Now for Grace—his own, his beloved! He went up in the lift, and tapped softly at the bedroom door. It opened instantly, and there she stood, fresh and fair, in a simple evening gown of some filmy grey stuff, a shy smile on her dear lips.

“Oh, what a tired and grubby boy!” she laughed. “He wants his dinner very badly, he does, and I b’lieve I do too! As the king and queen are travelling without attendants on this interesting occasion, the queen (that’s me) has laid out your things, sir—your majesty, I mean—and quite correctly I’m sure. I’ve done it so often for daddy. Now, don’t be long!”

“I shan’t be ten minutes, darling,” Roger assured her, and was almost as good as his word.

As charming a pair of lovers as could be found in the whole wide world they looked, as they sat facing each other at the daintily appointed dinner-table, with the head waiter—a little apple-cheeked, grey-haired, blue-eyed old man with an expansive smile—gliding in and out and ministering to their wants with paternal solicitude. *He* knew well enough what was due to the occasion; those travel-worn trunks hadn’t deceived him, any more than they had deceived the railway porter or anyone else! And the flourish with which he presented the wine list was mere pretence, for when, after a short discussion, they decided on champagne, he didn’t even have to go to fetch it, but instantly produced a magnum of the best, placed there, all ready, on the sideboard.

Dinner over, they moved to the big chesterfield drawn up before the blazing fire, and sat in discreet silence till the table was cleared and the beneficent waiter finally departed.

“At last!” said Roger, throwing his half-smoked

cigarette into the fire, and drawing his wife to him. "Isn't this cosy and jolly, darling?"

"Lovely," Grace murmured, snuggling happily in his arm. "Almost as good as our own home's going to be. Don't you wish we were there already, Roger, sitting in front of our very own fire?"

"I don't wish for anything better in the world than to have you beside me, sweetheart," he responded.

The little silence that followed, of sheer peace and content, was disturbed by a fierce onslaught of hail on the window-panes, and a blast of wind that swept and shrieked round the building like a legion of lost souls.

"My word, hark at that! It's going to be a wild night," said Roger. "No crossing for us to-morrow if it's like this. Why, you're shivering, dearest. Cold?"

"No, it's only that dreadful wail of the wind. When I was a little girl my nurse used to tell me it was the souls of drowned sailors shrieking, and I believed her, for years and years. . . . God guard all who are on the sea to-night!"

The words, uttered in a fervent whisper, were a real and fervent prayer. He knew that as he looked down lovingly at her sweet, thoughtful face.

"D'you know, Roger," she resumed presently, "I'm not sure that I want to go to Nice, or anywhere else abroad, after all."

"Why, then, we won't! The queen shall do exactly as she likes. I'm not a bit keen on a smart place either, only——"

Grace looked up with a little whimsical smile in which there was a touch of pathos.

"Only mother said we were to—that it was 'the proper thing'—and it was less trouble to agree with her than to argue the point. That's the real trouble, isn't it? And, after all, we haven't had a quiet moment to discuss anything between ourselves for weeks and weeks, what with mother and dressmakers on my side, and Sir Robert keeping you so hard at work on yours, right up to the last

moment too, upsetting us all so, and nearly making you too late to be married! Tiresome old gentleman!"

"It wasn't his fault," said Roger hastily. "But don't let us think any more of that. We're free to please ourselves now—go where we like and do what we like. So what shall we do? Stay here?"

"No. I've been thinking. Really it flashed into my mind while I was dressing and waiting for you before dinner. There's such a dear little place quite close here—St. Margaret's—where daddy and I stayed when he was getting over influenza, just after Armistice—this very same time of year, when you were still in France, you poor boy! We had the loveliest time, all by ourselves. Mother wouldn't come; she said it would be too deadly in the winter, but it wasn't—not for us, anyhow! And we had the cosiest rooms imaginable in a dinky cottage on the cliff, a regular sun-trap, with a dear old landlady, Miss Culpepper, who reminded us of 'Cranford' and cherished us both no end. Let's go over and see if she's still there and can put us up. I expect she can, for I remember we seemed to have the whole place to ourselves."

"Topping!" Roger agreed heartily, as he would have done if she had proposed to start on an expedition to Timbuctoo. "And, I say, darling, I'll try to get a car just for the time we're down here, and we'll have some jolly runs."

"Splendid! But won't that cost a lot?"

"Why, bless your careful little heart, think of all the money we shall save by scrapping that continental trip! It's a simply ripping idea!"

"I wonder what mother will say when she knows?" laughed Grace. "I shan't say a word to her about it when I write to her to-morrow; she'll think we're travelling; so will every one else for a week or two, for we won't own up till they might be getting anxious, except perhaps to daddy and Winnie, and they'll keep counsel all right. What fun it will be!"

CHAPTER X

GRACE LEARNS THE NEWS

“**T**O think that it should have been on our wedding day—almost at the very moment! Oh, the poor, poor soul! Who *can* have done the awful thing?”

Grace Carling's sweet face was pale and tear-stained. At last she had learned the grim news that Roger had successfully suppressed until now, just after breakfast in their sitting-room at the hotel. It would have been impossible to keep the secret from her longer; all the morning papers were full of the murder, though the mystery appeared deeper than ever. As he hastily scanned the columns while he waited for Grace, Roger noted that none of the reports so much as mentioned the stolen papers that had been returned in so extraordinary a manner and that almost certainly were the pivot of the tragedy. The police knew of these, for he himself had rung up Scotland Yard, and Sir Robert was awaiting the arrival of a detective when he, Roger, had been obliged to leave him. But evidently the information had been withheld from the Press.

The theory advanced, and considerably elaborated, was that which Thomson had propounded over the 'phone, and much stress was laid on the fact that the murderer had missed some at least of his anticipated spoil—the gold purse—with much conjecture as to whether the bag had contained any other valuables.

Naturally, Grace was terribly distressed; also, her quick mind instantly divined that this was the cause of

Roger's strange emotion yesterday, that, for the moment, had so startled and alarmed her.

"It was a shock," he confessed. "Honestly, darling, when I saw that poster, and George gave me the paper, I was more upset than I've ever been in my life before; what with the horror of the thing itself, and wanting to keep it from you. I couldn't bear to let you know, just then, the great day of our lives! Though even now I don't know how I managed it."

His voice was husky with emotion, and she looked up at him, smiling through her tears.

"It was dear of you, Roger! I never suspected—how could I? . . . But what in the world can she have been doing there, so near us, and in disguise, as they say?"

"Heaven knows, dear, except that I'm pretty certain she had been to a flat in a square nearly opposite; not for the first time, though why she went there, I know no more than you do."

"The square opposite? Why, that must be River-court Mansions. What makes you think she had been there?"

"Because I saw her, a few days ago. By George! it was only last Tuesday, though it seems more like a year. You remember I came to dinner——"

"Of course, and turned up very early."

He nodded.

"It was because I got away so much earlier than I expected that I walked from the station, and presently I saw her walking rapidly a few yards in front of me. I shouldn't have known her but for her gait: you know that curious way of hers—graceful I suppose, but——"

"I know, like a snake; we always said so!"

"Yes, and she was very plainly dressed, in a long, dark cloak and floating veil, almost like a nurse's uniform; but I was quite sure it was she; and it *was*, for she evidently wore the same get-up yesterday," he added, picking up

one of the newspapers and pointing to the detailed description.

"What did you do?" breathed Grace.

"Well, it wasn't my business, of course, and I had no right to spy on her, so I loitered a bit, increasing the distance between us. I saw her turn the corner, and when I reached the square I really couldn't resist just glancing down, and I caught sight of her blue veil disappearing through the entrance of the north block. That's all; I scarcely gave another thought to it."

"And you believe she went there again yesterday. But that's very important, isn't it, Roger? Oughtn't you to tell the police?"

"I don't know," he said slowly, and, hands in pockets, he paced up and down the room, paused and stared out of the window, frowning perplexedly.

Grace watched him with anxious, puzzled eyes. It seemed a long time before he turned to her again, and spoke with curious hesitation.

"You see, it's this way, darling. I'm thinking of Sir Robert, and of him alone. I fear there is a great deal more behind this—this crime than appears on the surface. The Press don't know of it yet, that's evident; the police may suspect, but I doubt if they *know*—in fact they can't know everything unless they've seen those papers that were lost, and that's unlikely, if it's true, as Thomson said, they've been returned, and are in Lord Warrington's hands. *He* will keep them safe enough!"

"But I don't understand," protested Grace. "Surely, Roger, the most important thing is to trace Lady Rawson's murderer?"

"No," said Roger decisively. "The most important thing is to keep all knowledge of those papers secret for the present. No disclosures can bring that poor, unhappy woman back to life; while if the secret information contained in those papers were prematurely divulged God

knows what would happen—war, almost to a certainty, and thousands of lives would be sacrificed.”

Grace drew a little sobbing breath, her eyes still intent on his face. She had a curious feeling that he was not speaking to her, but was arguing with some invisible person.

“I don’t believe her visit to Rivercourt Mansions had any connexion at all with the murder,” he continued, “except, indeed, that it brought her into the neighbourhood. She was robbed and killed by some loitering ruffian who had watched her—an old hand, doubtless, who, when he found he’d got nothing, got rid of the evidence instantly, very cleverly too—chucked the bag through the window of the cab, and slipped the envelope into the nearest pillar box.”

“You are sure she had those papers?”

“Absolutely, though I’ve no actual evidence. But I was certain of it from the first, and so, I am convinced, was Sir Robert, though of course he gave no hint of that. But she was the only person except ourselves who could possibly have had access to the keys of the safe.”

“But why should she steal them?”

“That I don’t know; I can only conjecture. You see, I’ve suspected her more or less vaguely for months. She was always coming in and out of the room—the only person who was allowed to do so when I was at work; but Sir Robert adored her, never crossed her in anything, and of course it was impossible for me to raise any objection! She used to come and go as softly as a cat—or a snake. Time after time I’ve been startled to find her close beside me, looking over my shoulder. On Wednesday night, the last time I saw her, she tried to get a look at those very papers, and I was just in time to prevent her. It all sounds very trivial perhaps, but there it is; and of course there was always the feeling that she was an alien. But I really couldn’t define my suspicions—at any rate, not till yesterday, and then not clearly.”

"How did you know she had gone to that place again?"

Again he hesitated, and resumed his restless pacing. Should he tell his wife everything? Yes. She was part of himself now—the better, purer, nobler part. He would have no secrets from her, except such secrets of State as were entrusted to him by his chief; and this was not one of those.

"I'll tell you the whole thing from first to last, darling," he said, seating himself beside her. "The moment I knew the papers were stolen I thought of her instinctively, and when I learned she was out I thought of the queer incident of Tuesday night. While Sir Robert was questioning the servants I turned up the Directory. There's only one foreign name among all the list at Rivercourt Mansions: 'G. Cacciola, Professor of Voice-Production.'"

"Cacciola! Good gracious!" gasped Grace. "Why, I know him quite well. He's Winnie's *maestro*, the dearest, kindest, funniest old thing imaginable. You must have heard me speak of him!"

"Don't remember it. But anyhow I thought I'd go there on spec. and ask for her. It couldn't do any harm and might be of immense service. As it was so near the church I'd just time, if I didn't go to Starr's to change, and I knew you'd forgive me for not turning up in glad rags, darling, if I told you all about it afterwards. So I said good-bye to Sir Robert, jumped into a taxi, and drove straight there. I saw an old Italian woman, and asked boldly for Lady Rawson. I'd guessed rightly—she was there, I'm convinced from the woman's manner, though she swore she wasn't, but she knew the name well enough, and I'd take my oath she was lying. I couldn't very well force my way in and search the place; and as time was running short there was nothing to be done but push off. Like an ass I had paid the taxi and never told the man to wait, and there wasn't another in sight."

"There never is thereabouts."

"That's why I was so late—that and the fog. I jumped

on a tram, got down at the Avenue, and plunged right into the fog. My hat! how thick it was—you couldn't see your hand before your face! Pretty position for a bridegroom, eh? I thought I never should get through in time; I kept barging into trees and palings till—well, you know the rest, darling."

"You poor boy! No wonder you looked half dead," Grace commented. Somehow his vivacious narrative had relieved the tension, diverted her mind from the main tragedy. "But how very queer about the *maestro*—Signor Cacciola, I mean. I wonder if Winnie knows that poor Lady Rawson knew him? I don't think she can, or she would certainly have said something about it."

"Well, she was there. But you see now, don't you, darling, why I am so reluctant to put the police on this? If her visits were innocent, why did she disguise herself? If they were not innocent—may I be forgiven if I wrong her—goodness knows what might come out, to add to poor Sir Robert's distress. So I'm sure it's best to do and say nothing, for the moment anyhow, except to ring up as I said I would."

He returned in about twenty minutes, and found her at the writing-table.

"Thomson again. Sir Robert is going on fairly well, but is not allowed to see anyone but him, and the nurse, of course. He says he gave him my message, and he seemed very touched, and begged me not to dream of coming back, as I could do nothing; I offered to, you know——"

"Of course, dear," Grace assented.

"And our plan holds? We'll be off to St. Margaret's?"

"Yes, oh, yes! let's get away from here," said Grace, with a quick little shiver, glancing round the room, where last night they had been so happy, but that had now become distasteful to her.

"All right, sweetheart. I'll be off to see about a car."

His quest was speedily successful, and within an hour they were on their way in a trim little two-seater.

They were still grave and subdued when they set forth, as was inevitable, but the shadow lifted from them, and their spirits rose as they sped on their way.

It was a glorious morning, more like April than November, for the gale had blown itself out during the night: the sun shone in a cloudless sky, the blue sea was flecked with dancing white wavelets, the keen, clear air exhilarating as champagne, and overhead larks soared to sing in heavenly chorus.

"Isn't it a dear, quaint, up-and-down little place?" said Grace, as they neared the village and slowed down. "Oh, there's the church! It's very, very old, and so beautiful. Roger, I'd like to go in just for a few minutes."

"Now?" he asked, in some surprise.

"Yes, if you don't mind. We've lots of time."

Of course he didn't mind, though he did wonder; and, after he had lovingly watched her slender figure mount the steps and disappear through the churchyard, he backed the car into a by-way, hailed a village lad and bade him keep an eye on it, and then followed her.

She was kneeling, her face bowed on her hands in prayer.

He stood still, there at the back of the church, his own head bowed, his eyes fixed on that kneeling figure that was all the world to him; and as slow minutes passed the sacred peace of the hushed and holy place stole into his own soul.

Presently she rose and joined him, and hand in hand they went out silently into the sunshine. Her eyes were misty with tears, but her face was serene and beautiful as that of an angel.

"I felt I must go, Roger, just for the little while," she whispered. "It was for *her*—for poor Lady Rawson. Some people say we should not pray for the dead, but—but if it is true, and it *is*, that souls live for ever, they may know—I believe they do—when we who are still here, think of them gently and lovingly, and it may comfort them! And I'm sure God loves us all, His poor erring

human children, however sinful we are, and—and that He *wants* us to think lovingly of each other."

Too moved for words, Roger could only look down at her with an almost adoring gaze. Dearly as he loved her, he had not realized as yet the spiritual strength and sweetness of her nature, so simple, so straightforward, and so steadfast.

He felt strangely humble, yet strangely happy, and from his own heart there went up a little silent prayer: "God make me worthy of her!"

"And now for dear old Miss Culpepper," she announced almost gaily as they settled themselves in the car once more, and Roger dismissed the attendant lad with a generous tip. "Oh, I do hope we shall find her at home, and that she can put us up. Down the hill, Roger, and the first turning. I'll tell you where to stop."

CHAPTER XI

HALCYON DAYS

IT was the prettiest white cottage imaginable, approached from the road by a flight of irregular steps and a steep little garden, now gay with chrysanthemums.

"It's like one of those toy 'weather houses,'" said Roger as they mounted the steps. "Does a little lady come out on fine days and a little man on wet ones?"

"I don't know anything about a little man, but you'll see the little lady directly—at least, I hope so. She's just like the cottage; you couldn't imagine anyone else owning it! Oh! did I warn you that she's a regular Mrs. Malaprop, bless her? She loves using long words, French for preference, and they're invariably the wrong ones, but she does it with an ineffable air of gentility, and is dreadfully offended if anyone laughs, so be careful! Oh! and be *sure* you wipe your shoes as you go in, and she'll love you for ever. S-sh!"

The green door, adorned with brilliantly polished brass handle, knocker, and letter box, was opened by a small, spare, trim little woman, who might have stepped out of the pages of "Punch" some forty years ago. She wore her white hair in a closely curled "fringe," neatly held in place by a fine net, with an absurd little butterfly bow of black lace perched on the crown of her head, presumably as a sort of apology for a cap. The skirt of her long, skimpy gown of black merino was trimmed with a series of tiny frills of the same stuff, and had quillings of snowy net at the neck and wrists, and her black silk apron was artfully adjusted to accentuate the slimness of her tiny

waist. Through a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez her mild blue eyes scanned her visitors inquiringly.

"How are you, Miss Culpepper?" said Grace, extending her hand. "I wonder if you remember me?"

"I ought to do, I'm sure," said the little old lady graciously. "But at the moment—why, of course, it's Miss Armitage! How often I have thought of you and your dear father. I trust Mr. Armitage is in good health." She glanced at Roger, and Grace blushed and smiled.

"Quite, thanks. But I'm not 'Miss Armitage' now. May I introduce my husband, Mr. Roger Carling? You see, we are taking a—a little holiday, and made up our minds all in a hurry to come over and ask whether you could put us up for a week or two."

"Dear me—married—how romantic!" Miss Culpepper chirruped. "Permit me to tender my congratulations, my dear, to you both. And pray step in."

She led the way into the parlour on the right—a cosy and charming little room, spotlessly clean and bright.

"I shall be delighted to accommodate you, to the extent of my very humble *menace*. As you may remember, my dear Miss—I mean, Mrs. Carling—I retain no domestic during the winter months, when I so seldom have any guests, though I am very glad when they do come, like you and Mr. Armitage. And, do you know, I still think of that delicious *jambon* he sent me for Christmas, just after you left. As I wrote to him at the time, a more delicious bird was never brought to table! Now perhaps you would like to see the sleeping apartment—the large one over this; it is not quite ready, of course, as I did not expect you, but can be *dérangé* in a very few minutes."

"We don't want to put you about in the very least," Grace explained. "We can go and get lunch somewhere in the village—we shall have to find a garage for the motor-car anyhow; it's waiting there in the road—and we can come back at any time you like. Oh, you darling! Why, is this Cæsar?"

A magnificent black Persian cat stalked into the room, and stared gravely at Grace with its inscrutable amber eyes.

The question seemed to embarrass little Miss Culpepper, who, after a deprecating glance at Roger's back—he was looking out of the window—mysteriously beckoned Grace out of the room.

She followed, cuddling the cat, which she had picked up, and which lay quite quietly in her arms without evincing any emotion whatever.

"It's the same animal, my dear, whom you were so fond of as a kitten," Miss Culpepper explained in a discreet whisper; "but unfortunately she proved to be a—female; very embarrassing! So she is now *inconnu* as 'Cleopatra.' Perhaps I should not have said unfortunate though, for a lady near possesses a most beautiful Persian with whom Cleopatra—er—mates; and the provender are exquisite, and provide quite a nice little source of additional income. She has two now, that I expect to dispose of for quite a large sum, though I *do* hate parting with them; it seems so sordid."

"Oh, do let me see them," Grace pleaded, and was graciously invited into the kitchen, where the two kittens, an adorable pair, pranced to meet them. Cleopatra jumped down and crooned over her offspring, and Grace promptly sat on the floor and gathered all three of them into her lap.

"Most extraordinary," murmured Miss Culpepper, "Cleopatra evidently remembers you, after all this time. As a rule she never allows anyone but myself to caress her or the kittens; in fact, she usually swears at and attempts to bite any stranger who has the timidity to approach her. So unladylike!"

"I feel quite honoured," laughed Grace. "Of course you remember me and love me, don't you, Cleopatra, darling? And you'll let me have one of your babies. We must take one home with us, Miss Culpepper, if it's old enough."

"Oh, yes, quite old enough, just three months to-day; indeed one has already gone—Cæsarion—to the clergyman who was staying here when they were tiny, and bespoke him at once. It was he who named them. This is the other—er—male, 'Dear Brutus.' Why 'Dear' I really don't know, though naturally he is very dear to me. And his sister is Semiramis, because she is so *melligrent*. The Rev. Smithson—such a learned man, my dear Mrs. Carling—said she would certainly grow up into a warrior queen. They are beautiful names, I consider—pathological, of course."

"Historical," Grace suggested, and instantly repented. For Miss Culpepper drew herself up and spoke, gently indeed, but in a tone that conveyed a subtle reproof.

"I consider 'pathological' the more correct. It is as well to be accurate even in the smallest matters, and I believe it is very doubtful if the originals of the names ever really lived."

"She's priceless!" Grace declared, when she repeated this to Roger, as she accompanied him back to the car, with a perfect imitation of the old lady's manner. "And the dearest, kindest old soul in the world. Aren't you glad we came? She's going to give me all sorts of household tips, as she did when I was here with daddy. She's a wonderful cook. So hurry back when you've garaged the car, and we shall have lunch ready."

"Good!" said Roger heartily. "I'm as hungry as a hunter. So long, darling."

When he returned he found Grace, enveloped in one of Miss Culpepper's big cooking aprons, and with Dear Brutus perched on her shoulder, busily putting the finishing touches to the table, while a delicious fragrance of omelette was wafted from the kitchen.

A very dainty meal the resourceful old lady managed to serve at such short notice, and how they enjoyed it!

For the time the shadow had passed from them. London and the Rawsons, all the tragedy and trouble, had receded

into the far distance, and life seemed very fair, very joyous. They were not callous—far from it ; they were only a pair of lovers, rejoicing in each other, in the sunshine, in “ the delight of simple things, and mirth that hath no bitter stings ! ”

It was a wonderful week-end, halcyon days of sheer, unalloyed happiness ; an abiding memory to dwell on in the time to come, when the world was dark indeed, and even hope seemed dead.

It was amazing how swiftly the hours sped. There was a shopping expedition down the village in the afternoon to order supplies, when the crowning glory of the purchases was a noble dish of big pink prawns, caught that very morning, and still steaming hot from the pot. They carried them back and had them for tea—a real square-meal tea, and ate them all, except such as were demolished by Cleopatra, Semiramis, and Dear Brutus, who attended the feast and exhibited an appreciative appetite for fresh prawns nicely peeled and proffered.

And how snug it was, how peaceful in the little parlour, with the lamp lighted and the curtains drawn, when Roger lounged happily in the easy chair beside the fire, and Grace sat at the little mellow-toned old Broadwood piano, and sang old songs, played snatches of old melodies, grave and gay, finishing up with Sullivan’s tender and wistful love duet :

None shall part us from each other,
One in life and death are we,

and Roger came to her side and sang Strephon’s part, quite softly, for her ears alone, though if he could have sung with like expression on the stage, and to order, he would have made his fortune !

After that there was such a silence that little Miss Culpepper considered it advisable to be seized with a fit of coughing and to make quite a business of opening the door when she brought the supper-tray.

A chill breath from the world they had left behind swept

over them indeed for a few brief minutes next morning, when Roger went down to the garage to fetch the car, and brought back three London papers—all he could get in the village.

"Very little about it at all," he said. "And nothing fresh. . . . The inquest was merely opened and adjourned for a week; and they say, 'The police are following up a clue'; but they always say that."

"How is Sir Robert?" asked Grace.

"Improving steadily. I heard that from Thomson. I rang him up from the hotel. He says the funeral is fixed for Tuesday, at noon, and I really think I ought to go up for it, darling. I'm sure Sir Robert would like to see me, if he's allowed to see anyone by then, and I could get back at night."

"Of course," Grace assented gravely. "It's right that you should go. Poor Sir Robert! My heart aches for him; and I—I feel almost ashamed of our happiness, Roger, when I think of his crushing sorrow."

"I know. But, after all, it wouldn't do him any good—or her either, poor soul!—if we were to try to be as miserable as anything. Come along, sweetheart, let's get out into the sunshine. The car's a regular peach, isn't she? And what weather! Perfect 'Indian summer,' by Jove! Might have been made on purpose for us."

So they set forth for another glorious day in the open, over the downs and through the weald, splendid with the gracious, wistful beauty of late autumn; and back by the coast, to arrive as dusk was falling at their peaceful retreat. How invitingly homelike the little room was with its cheerful fire, and Miss Culpepper and the cats coming out to the porch to welcome them.

"And what's the programme for to-morrow?" asked Roger after supper, as they sat together in lazy content on the couch drawn up by the fire, Cleopatra and Semiramis ensconced on Grace's lap, Dear Brutus snuggling on Roger's shoulder.

"I want to go to the early Celebration in the morning," said Grace. "I nearly always do, you know, and to-morrow——"

"Me too, beloved," he answered softly ; and she slipped her hand in his.

There was no need for further speech ; on this great point there had long been perfect understanding, perfect sympathy between them.

And so, in the fresh, sweet dawn of an exquisite morning, they went up the hill together to the little church, and with full hearts made their "sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving." As they knelt before the altar, I am sure they silently renewed those solemn vows they had made three short days before ; as I am very sure also that Grace's gentle soul sent up a fervent prayer for that of Paula Rawson, the beautiful woman whose fate had been so strange and sudden and terrible.

The glory of the risen sun shone on their happy faces when they came forth, and life was beautiful beyond words. They would have liked to share their happiness with the whole world. As that was impossible they shared it with little Miss Culpepper, and took her, snugly sandwiched between them, in the car to Canterbury. It was Roger's idea, joyfully acclaimed by Grace.

"She'd love it ; she told me yesterday she had never been in a motor-car in her life, and I thought then we must take her for some runs. She may think Sunday excursions wicked ; but we'll ask her."

Never was an old lady more gratified by an invitation.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Carling and Mr. Carling, there is nothing, I assure you *nothing*, would give me greater pleasure !" she cried ; "but"—Grace glanced at Roger as one who would say "I told you so"—"but I am torn between inclination and duty. The cathedral ! It is so many, many years since I visited that beautiful vane ; it would indeed be a privilege to do so once more,

and in such a positively uxorious manner. But your dinner—there will be no one to prepare it ! ”

So that was the only objection, easily disposed of.

“ We’re going to dine at Canterbury, of course,” said Roger ; and Grace reminded her that the pheasant would keep till to-morrow and there was plenty in the house for supper.

Her housewifely scruples set at rest, in what a delightful flutter of excitement she retired to “ dress,” reappearing enveloped in quite an assortment of ancient shawls and a long ostrich feather “ boa,” the floating ends of which, with those of the gauze scarf adjusted around her “ toque,” flapped across Roger’s eyes horribly when they started, till Grace twined them snugly round the old lady’s neck and tucked the ends in securely.

Good it was to see Miss Culpepper, proudly erect, beaming with benevolent condescension on such pedestrians as they met ; good to hear the ecstatic comments she chirped into their sympathetic ears ; to note, when they reached the cathedral just in time for the service, the superb dignity with which she advanced up the aisle, visibly fortified with the consciousness that she had “ come in a motor-car.”

Verily she had the time of her life that sunny Sunday, as she told Grace, with tears in her kind old eyes, after dinner at the hotel, when Roger had gone to bring round the car for the homeward run.

“ I’ve never had such a treat in all my long life before ! ” she cried. “ And nobody has ever been so good to me as you two dear young people. I don’t know how to begin to thank you, only—God bless you both and send you the rich happiness you deserve all your lives ! ” Grace hugged her, and between smiles and tears Miss Culpepper continued : “ Do you know there’s only one little thing in this happy, happy day I’d have wished different, and you’ll think it silly of me. But, though the lovely music in the cathedral thrilled me, I *did* wish they had chosen

another anthem. 'Hear my prayer, O Lord, incline Thine ear, consider my complaint,' is most beautiful, but I couldn't really echo it to-day, for I hadn't any 'complaint' to make to Him. I'd have liked them to sing the Hallelujah Chorus, and I believe I should not only have stood up, but have joined in!"

Happy, happy day, with never a cloud to mar it!

Next morning the storm broke.

Roger went down the village to fetch the papers, and on returning saw, with some surprise, a taxi-cab standing in the road below the cottage.

In the tiny hall, almost blocking it up, stood a big, burly man, whom he instantly discerned as a policeman in plain clothes, and who greeted him with a civil "Good morning."

He had the impression that Miss Culpepper was fluttering nervously in the background, by the kitchen door, with Cleopatra beside her, staring with her big, luminous eyes at the intruder.

"Do you wish to speak to me?" he asked.

The man merely motioned towards the half-open parlour door, and, with a curious sense of impending disaster upon him, Roger entered.

Grace was standing there, her fair face as white as the big cooking apron she had donned, and with her was a little, wiry man, a stranger.

"This is my husband, Mr. Carling," said Grace quietly. "Roger, this gentleman wishes to speak to you."

"Just so—and alone, if you please, ma'am," said Snell.

CHAPTER XII

ALONE

“**R**OGER has been arrested for the murder of Lady Rawson.”

The words repeated themselves over and over in Grace Carling's brain with maddening persistence, as she sat perfectly still and silent, her hands grasping the arms of the chair, her lips firmly set, her eyes gazing straight in front of her. But for those wide, tragic eyes she might have been a stone figure.

She could never afterwards clearly remember what happened in that brief half-hour—possibly less—before Roger was taken away, and she was left alone.

She had made no scene—that at least was something for which to be thankful; though when the detective said he wanted to speak to her husband alone, some strong instinct had forbidden her to go, and she had moved to Roger's side, saying quite quietly:

“I don't think you can have anything to say to my husband that I may not hear”; and, after a moment's hesitation, Roger said:

“My wife is quite right; I have no secrets from her. What is your business with me?”

And then—and then—the shock came, or rather was intensified, for when she first saw these two men of ill-omen a strange, swift premonition told her what their errand was.

So when Snell—more embarrassed than he had ever before felt in the execution of his duty, and most anxious to get the difficult business over—bluntly pronounced his

formula, and added the customary caution as to any statement made by his prisoner being liable to be used as evidence against him, she was scarcely conscious of surprise, only of intense indignation.

Roger had uttered a startled, horrified exclamation, and she involuntarily slipped her hand through his arm, not for support—that hand did not tremble, nor did she, but its pressure was eloquent.

Her slender figure drawn to its full height, her grey eyes fixed steadily on Snell, she spoke, coldly, deliberately, in a voice that sounded in her own ears like that of a stranger :

“How utterly preposterous. You have made a great, a terrible mistake.”

“Excuse me, madam ; I have to do my duty. I would have spared you if I could, but you *would* stay, you know,” Snell protested, watching her as closely and relentlessly as she watched him, for the moment leaving Roger Carling to Evans, who had silently entered the room and taken up his position beside him.

Having had a good deal of experience with women under such circumstances, Snell fully expected a violent hysterical outburst, but, as he afterwards confided to his wife, he had never seen such marvellous self-possession as Mrs. Carling displayed.

“I never felt sorrier for anyone in my life, nor ever felt a greater respect for anyone. She was simply splendid ! And it was rough on her, poor girl—on their honeymoon and all ; and of course she had nothing in the world to do with the crime. And she loves him and believes in him utterly. Mark my words, she’ll believe in him to the very end, whatever that may be.”

“Perhaps he didn’t do it,” suggested Mrs. Snell.

“That’s to be proved at the trial,” said Snell. Not even to the wife of his bosom would he commit himself to any expression of opinion on the guilt or innocence of any prisoner. That was outside his duty.

And he was right. The control Grace imposed on herself, and that helped Roger to maintain his during the ordeal, was nothing less than heroic.

She announced her intention of accompanying them back to London, but accepted Snell's decision that that was undesirable—in fact not permissible—and arranged to settle up and follow in the course of the day.

"When and where shall I see you, Roger?" she asked. "This—this dreadful mistake will be put right, of course, but I suppose it will be a few days at least—and till then?"

"That will be all right," Snell interposed. "Mr. Carling's solicitors will arrange everything, and you will be able to see him at any reasonable time for the present."

"Thank you. Who are your solicitors, Roger?"

"The only firm I know anything about are Twinings—Sir Robert's solicitors, you know; but they've never done any business for me personally. I've never needed it. I'd better communicate with them. I suppose I shall have facility for that?" he added, glancing at Snell. "I don't know anything about these things, or the procedure, myself."

"You'll have every facility," Snell assured him. "But though I don't want to hurry you, we must be getting off now—within ten minutes, in fact—and you'll want to take some necessaries with you. Perhaps Mrs. Carling will put them together? I'm sorry, madam, but I must not lose sight of Mr. Carling. Duty's duty!"

"I will fetch them," she said, and exchanged a long, silent glance with Roger ere she left him. Still she would not—dare not—trust herself to think of anything but the task of the moment, and swiftly collected and packed in his bag all he would be likely to want—"only for a few days" she told herself, to sustain her courage—and returned to the parlour within the stipulated time.

Even when the moment of parting came, and she clung to him in a last embrace, she did not weep.

"Good-bye, my darling, till to-morrow," he said in a

hoarse, broken whisper. "It will be all right in a few days; try not to fret—to worry. Oh, my God, how hard it is!"

"I will be brave," she whispered back—"brave as you are, my own, my beloved. God guard you, and show your innocence before all the world—soon!"

She stood in the porch and watched him, all her soul in her eyes, managed even to smile and waft a last kiss to him as he leaned forward for one final glimpse. Then, as the sound of the motor died away in the distance, she went back to the parlour and sat down, in dumb, stricken, tearless misery.

All the time little Miss Culpepper had fluttered about in a state of increasing agitation, peering out of the kitchen door at intervals, retreating swiftly when she feared she might be discovered, and keeping Cleopatra and her kittens from intruding on the colloquy. Now she fluttered in and out the parlour, looking wistfully and anxiously at that still figure in the chair, but not daring to speak to her. At last she could bear it no longer, but fell on her knees beside Grace, putting her thin old arms round her and crying: "Oh, my dear, my dear, don't sit like that; you frighten me so! Say something, do something; tell me what's the matter; let me do something to help! Oh, you're as cold as ice—my poor darling!"

Grace shivered; she was indeed icy cold, though she had not been conscious of that or of anything else but those words that whirled round and round in her brain, and that now at last she uttered aloud with stiff, white lips.

"Roger has been arrested. They say he murdered Lady Rawson."

Miss Culpepper uttered a shrill little scream.

"Oh, my dear child, how wicked, how positively suppostorous. Not the murder, of course—no, no, I don't mean that, it *was* wicked—but to say that dear young gentleman could have done such a thing—he to whom

Cleopatra has taken as she has never taken to any human being of the sterner sex, not even to the Reverend Smithson, though he is such a learned man. And I trust Cleopatra's common sense against all the judges and juries in the world ! But, my darling girl, you must excuse me—I can't help it—for you *are* a darling and so is your dear, handsome young husband—no wonder you are so distressed ! But don't sit like that ! Weep, my love, weep ; it will ease your poor heart ! As for me, if I'd only known what those meridians of the law were after I'd—I'd let them have a piece of my mind ! I'll let them have it yet, that I will ! ”

She actually shook her small fists, in imagination threatening Snell and his fellow-“ meridian ” with physical violence ; and so irresistibly comic did the staunch little creature appear that the tension in Grace's overwrought brain snapped, and she laughed aloud—laughter that brought blessed tears—and for a time they just clung together and sobbed, till gradually she regained a measure of real composure, quite different from that frozen, unnatural calm she had forced herself to maintain.

She told Miss Culpepper as much of the circumstances as seemed necessary. It was a relief to do so now, and the old lady punctuated the recital with exclamations and comments.

“ I saw something about a murder in those newspapers you lent me on Saturday,” she confessed ; “ but I really did not read it. I very seldom do read newspapers ; they are so full of *cunards* in these days that one really does not know what to believe. And of course I never associated it with you two—how could I ? And on your wedding day ! Of course, I *knew* you were only just married ; though I pretended I didn't, as you didn't tell me in so many words. And to think of the honeymoon ending like this ! ”

“ It hasn't ended,” said Grace. “ Roger will be, he must be, released—soon ; to-day, perhaps. But I must be up and doing—I must get back to Town by the next train ;

and I must go to the garage and see about having the car sent back to Dover."

There were, indeed, many things to see to, and eagerly the old lady helped. Lovingly, while Grace had gone on her errand, she prepared a dainty meal, and stood over her, coaxing and insisting till she made a pretence at least of eating.

"I can't bear to think of you travelling alone," she declared. "I wish I could go with you, though it is many years since I went to London. But if I can be of any help, of any comfort, my dear, be sure to let me know and I will shut up the cottage and come to you at once. And there's 'Dear Brutus'—you won't want to take him with you, of course, but the very moment you are ready for him I will send him up—a little present with my love, for I couldn't think of selling him to you. He may be a little *consommé*, and bring you luck! Who knows?"

She wished she could have taken the old lady with her, but that was impossible. It was far more of a wrench to leave her and the cottage—that tiny abode of peace and love and goodwill where she and her beloved had had those three days of unalloyed happiness—than it had been to leave the home of her girlhood, whither she must now return, for to-day at least.

A horror of great loneliness came over her as she drove to the station, and she strove against it valiantly. She must put aside all selfish considerations, and be brave and calm—for Roger's sake.

From the station she sent a wire to her mother, and one to Winnie Winston, giving the time of her arrival at Charing Cross.

There was no one to meet her, but she was not surprised; Winnie would probably be out when the wire was delivered; it was very unlikely that her mother would trouble to come to the station, and her father she knew was lecturing at Edinburgh this week.

The sight of the contents bills of the evening papers,

all flaunting the news of Roger's arrest, hurt her like a physical blow; but she could not obtain a copy of any paper; the next edition was due, and was evidently being eagerly awaited.

After a moment's thought she decided to drive first to the solicitor Roger had mentioned, whose offices were in Westminster. There a fresh shock awaited her.

She was shown at once into the private room of the senior partner, Mr. Twining, who received her very kindly, with a grave attitude of pity that was somehow disconcerting, and her heart sank as she listened to what he had to say.

"Yes, Mr. Carling rang us up from—er—when he arrived in Town, and we immediately furnished him with the address of a most reliable firm, Messrs. Spedding and Straight, who, as we have since ascertained, have undertaken to arrange for his defence. It is, of course, absolutely impossible for us to do so, under the circumstances, as we are acting for Sir Robert Rawson."

It flashed to her mind instantly what this meant, and she spoke impulsively.

"Mr. Twining, surely Sir Robert does not for a moment believe my husband is guilty of this—this awful thing?" He did not answer, and his eyes avoided her steady, searching gaze. "No one who really knows Roger could believe it for a moment," she continued; "and Sir Robert knows and loves him: they have been almost like father and son!"

"Quite so; but this is a most painful and complicated matter. I cannot explain more fully, but you will realize in time that we could not come to any other decision. And I assure you, Mrs. Carling, that with Messrs. Spedding your husband's defence will be in the best hands."

"Will you give me their address? I will go to them now."

"With pleasure. I will write it for you."

He took a sheet of paper, wrote the address, and handed it to her, saying:

"But if you will be advised by me you will not go to them till to-morrow. It's getting late now, and you cannot possibly learn anything or do anything to-night. In fact, their office will be closed. Good-bye, and please believe that I sympathize with you most deeply, and would gladly do anything in my power to help you," he added, and himself escorted her through the clerks' office and to the waiting cab.

He was sorry for *her*—would help *her* if he could, but not Roger! He, too, like Sir Robert, believed him guilty. She knew it as if he had said so openly.

"When you see anyone selling evening papers, stop, I want one," she instructed the cab-driver, and at the next corner he pulled up for the purpose.

It was the final edition with half the front page occupied by the latest news of the "Rawson Murder Mystery," which included a brief account of Roger's arrest, and also the full story of the secret service papers that had been stolen and restored, very much as Roger had narrated it to her, with no hint as to the actual contents of the papers, merely stating that they were of great international importance; but with the account of Lady Rawson's visit to Rivercourt Mansions, and some picturesque notes on Cacciola and his Russian protégé.

What was it Roger had said the other day when he broke the news to her? That it was far more important that all information about those papers should be suppressed than that the murderer of Lady Rawson should be traced. Then who could have divulged the secret, given it to the Press?

She could scarcely believe her eyes as she saw a sub-heading—"Interview with Sir Robert Rawson"—over a few brief paragraphs revealing the astounding fact that Sir Robert himself had authorized and endorsed the publication!

She was still brooding painfully over this revelation when she reached her destination—the big, comfortable

suburban house she had left as a bride such a few days before, that now seemed like a lifetime.

The trim maid who opened the door uttered a little compassionate exclamation.

"Oh, miss—I mean, ma'am— isn't it dreadful? And how ill you look! Madam's in the drawing-room. Shall I pay the cab?"

"No. Ask him to wait," said Grace, though why she said so she did not know.

She went swiftly through the hall, entered the drawing-room, and closed the door behind her.

Her mother was seated by the fire—a remarkably pretty woman, with fair hair and turquoise-blue eyes, who looked younger than her daughter to-day, for Grace, white cheeked and hollow eyed, had aged visibly during these terrible hours.

"Mother!" she said piteously.

Mrs. Armitage rose, throwing down the newspaper she had been absorbed in—an earlier edition of the one Grace still clutched—and came towards her daughter.

Her pretty, pink-and-white face wore a most peevish, disagreeable expression, and there was no trace of sympathy in her hard, blue eyes.

"So you've got here, Grace. I had your wire, but I simply couldn't come to meet you. I was too terribly upset, and your father's away. What an awful disgrace for us all. Roger must have been mad—raving mad!"

Grace threw up her hand, as if to ward off a blow.

"Mother!" she cried, "what do you mean? You don't—you can't think that my Roger is a——"

She could not bring herself to utter the word. But Mrs. Armitage could.

"A murderer! Of course he is. There's not a shadow of doubt about it. He knew poor Lady Rawson had those wretched papers, and followed and stabbed her as he couldn't get them any other way; and then had the nerve to come on and be married to you—to *my* daughter!"

No wonder he was so late, and looked so disreputable. I never liked him, I never trusted him—you know I didn't ; but I never dreamed that he was capable of such a horrible thing. As I say, he must have been mad, but that doesn't make it any better for us ; and what on earth we are to do I don't know ! If only——”

“ Stop ! ” cried Grace, so imperatively that Mrs. Armitage recoiled. “ If you or anyone else say my husband committed this murder you lie ! ”

The elder woman's blue eyes flashed, her voice rang out shrilly.

“ How dare you speak to me like that ! I say he did do it ; and he'll hang for it—and serve him right for disgracing you and your family. Where are you going ? ”

“ Out of this house,” said Grace, and stumbled into the hall, where the maid lingered by the open outer door, stumbled blindly forward and almost fell into the arms of Winnie Winston, who arrived, breathless, on the doorstep.

“ Grace ! Oh, my darling girl ! I got the wire too late to meet you, so rushed on here ! ”

Grace clutched her, searched her face with anguished eyes.

“ Winnie, tell me the truth. You don't believe my Roger did—it ? ”

“ Believe it ? I should think not, indeed ! Who could believe it who knows him ? ” said Winnie staunchly.

“ God bless you for that, Winnie,” cried Grace brokenly.

“ Oh, my dear, take me out of this—anywhere, anywhere ! ”

CHAPTER XIII

AUSTIN'S THEORY

"**I**F I hadn't turned up just at that very moment, I believe Grace would have died on the doorstep. I hope there's not another woman in the world would have behaved so abominably as Mrs. Armitage; but it is just like her. I never could imagine how she came to have such a daughter as Grace! But of course she takes after her father—the professor's a dear. But what a life the pair of them have had with that horrid little creature!"

Winnie Winston spoke in an emphatic undertone, for the walls of the Chelsea flat were thin, and in the adjoining room Grace was in bed, worn out and fast asleep.

Winnie had insisted on administering hot soup and a full dose of aspirin, and sat beside the exhausted girl, holding her hand, stroking her aching forehead, cherishing her with all womanly endearments, till, between them, she and Mother Nature, and the beneficent drug brought blessed sleep and oblivion to the tortured brain and heart.

Then Winnie stole away, and presently, as he so often did, Austin Starr turned up, to whom she poured out her indignation at Mrs. Armitage's callous conduct.

"I always guessed she could be a holy terror if she chose. Though she has always been mighty civil to me," said Austin.

"Of course. She always is to men, and most of them think she's an angel. Why, she made a dead set at Roger when they first knew him, and was furious when she found he wasn't taking any, and that it was Grace he was in love with. She's been sniffy with them both ever since—mean

little cat ! What *do* you suppose she said to Grace at the very last moment before she went to the church the other day ? ”

“ Something sweet and maternal,” suggested Austin sarcastically.

“ I don’t think ! She came into Grace’s room, preening herself like a canary—the first time she’d been near her to my knowledge, and I got there pretty early to help Grace dress. Mrs. Armitage just looked her up and down and said, ‘ Really, Grace, you look like a corpse ; white never did suit you. Hadn’t you better make up a bit ? ’ I could have shaken her ! And when there was that dreadful delay at the church she never even came through to the vestry with us, but was only fussing and fuming because the Rawsons hadn’t come. While now, if you please, she’s made up her nasty little mind that Roger is guilty and is going to be hanged, and had the fiendish cruelty to blurt it out to Grace the moment she arrived. It was enough to kill her ! ”

“ Sure,” conceded Austin gravely. “ I’m not making any excuse for Mrs. Armitage—her conduct was just abominable—but we’ve got to face facts, Miss Winnie ; and the great fact is that I’m afraid a good few people are of the same opinion.”

Winnie sprang up, a passionate figure, and pointed an accusing forefinger at him.

“ Austin Starr, you don’t dare to sit there and tell me that you believe your friend Roger Carling is a murderer ! ”

His clever, good-tempered face—a face that inspired confidence in most people—betrayed embarrassment, distress, perplexity ; his silence infuriated Winnie.

“ Answer me ! ” she ejaculated in an imperative whisper, emphasized by a stamp of her foot.

“ No, I do not,” he said slowly. “ I never will. But the case is very black against him, and there’s a lot of excuse for the people who do think it.”

She gave a little sigh of relief.

"I'm glad *you* don't, anyhow; for if you did I'd never willingly speak to you again."

Austin rose, and stood beside her, looking down earnestly at her charming, animated face.

"I'd give my right hand, I'd give ten years of my life at its best—Winnie, I'd give everything dearest to me in the world except the hope of winning you—to be able to clear Roger Carling from this charge," he said slowly.

For weeks, for months she had known in her heart that Austin Starr loved her, had known too that she loved him, but never before had he spoken like this, never had there been any sentimental passages between them, only a beautiful frank friendship, that after all is the very best foundation on which a man and a woman can build the love that lasts!

And now—though how it came about neither of them could have said—her hands were in his, he drew her, unresisting to his arms, and their lips met for the first time.

A wonderful moment for them both, when, without another word, he knew his hope was fulfilled—that he had already won her. It was excusable that, for a few moments, they almost forgot those other hapless lovers, their nearest friends, now so tragically parted. Yet they soon remembered and resumed counsel, with just one little difference that meant a lot to them—that whereas before they had sat facing each other, one each side the fire-place, they were now side by side.

"Can't *you* do anything to bring light on it all, Austin?" she asked.

He passed his hand perplexedly over his sleek hair.

"I mean to do everything I can, dear, but——"

"Haven't you any theory?"

"I've had quite a lot, and tried to follow them up, but they won't wash—not one. I felt mighty uneasy when I found Lady Rawson had been to your old *maestro's* flat and that Roger had followed her there."

"Did he! When did you find that out?"

"The same night, just after Snell, the detective, came here, and asked so many questions. I went straight to the flat."

"You never told me!"

"I never told anyone; but I soon found that Snell knew all about it too, and as he kept silence so did I. Though what I couldn't make out was *why* Roger went on her track like that, when he had so little time to spare. It was an utter mystery till I got the clue when the news came through about those secret papers, and I went straight to Sir Robert and saw him. It was he who sent it; Snell must have known it all the time and suppressed it—never gave even me a hint."

"Then you wrote the 'interview'? I thought so. Did Sir Robert say anything else? What does he think?"

"That's the worst of it. He is absolutely convinced that his wife was murdered by Roger, and is implacable against him. That's not to be wondered at, with the poor thing still lying dead in that great, silent house. The funeral is to-morrow, and as I can't go to both, I shall go there instead of to the court to hear the case opened against Roger."

"Oh, Austin, why? It would be a comfort to him and to Grace too, to have you there!"

"Yes, but I've a queer sort of feeling that at the funeral I may get some clue that would be of value. I can't explain it, but there it is. And anyhow the case will surely be adjourned to-morrow. They can't do anything else. It was terrible to see Sir Robert to-day. He is making a wonderful recovery physically, and was sitting up in a wheel-chair, though he's paralysed in the lower limbs, and I doubt if he'll ever walk again. But his brain is clear enough, and his animus against Roger is simply awful. The queer thing is that he acknowledges that those papers were of such supreme importance that—well, honestly, I gathered the impression that if anyone but his own wife

had been murdered in order to recover them he'd have considered the crime justifiable and tried to hush it up. The things we're most up against are that Roger undoubtedly was there on the scene, and that he was the one person concerned who knew the contents of the papers and was most interested in getting them back to Sir Robert. You and I, and poor Mrs. Carling herself, are certain he did not commit the murder—just because we know him. But the question is—Who did ? ”

“ It's curious that the *maestro* should be mixed up in it,” mused Winnie.

“ Have you seen him since ? ”

“ No, there was no reason why I should.”

“ I have, and Boris Melikoff too—this afternoon. I remembered him—Melikoff—when I saw him again. I met him here some months back, in the summer.”

She nodded.

“ That Sunday night, when he sang so divinely. It's the only time I've seen him. A handsome boy, but there's something queer and unbalanced about him, though I believe the *maestro* cares for him more than for anyone else alive. Grace was here that night, too—not Roger ; it was when he was abroad with the Rawsons. Why, Austin, could it have been him, Melikoff—in jealousy ? I could imagine him doing anything ! ”

Starr shook his head.

“ No. He's ruled out personally. He was down at Birmingham. But I'm going to cultivate him assiduously, and, if possible, his compatriots who forgather with him at Cacciola's and elsewhere. I believe that's the direction in which the truth will be found. Snell doesn't. *He* is sure he's got a clear, straightforward case, and that his duty's finished ! ”

Winnie frowned thoughtfully.

“ You think Lady Rawson and Boris were members of a secret society ? ”

“ Sure ! ”

"And that one of them watched, and followed, and killed her?"

"Possibly."

"Then why didn't he keep the papers?"

"That's the snag. But suppose he or she—it might have been a woman—didn't want the papers, that it was a personal vendetta? That's the line I mean to follow now."

"It sounds quite likely," she agreed. "How clever of you, Austin. But how are you going to set about it?"

"Can't say yet, dear. I must feel my way somehow."

"Perhaps something fresh and helpful will come out in court to-morrow," said Winnie hopefully.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GIRL AT THE GRAVE

THE beautiful little Russian church was filled to the very doors for the solemn and stately ceremonial of Paula Rawson's funeral service. Many representatives of royalty were there, Lord Warrington and several of his staff, cabinet ministers, ambassadors, peers—everyone who was "anyone" in the innermost circle of London society seemed to be present, except Sir Robert Rawson himself.

And yet to Austin Starr's acutely sympathetic and impressionable mind it seemed that there were no mourners there; that all these distinguished people had assembled as a mere conventional duty, an expression of conventional respect and sympathy for the bereaved husband; that they cared nothing for the dead woman lying there in her coffin, under the magnificent purple pall. She was even lonelier in death than she had been in life.

The impression was confirmed when at last the service was over, and the congregation emerged into the gloom and mud of the streets, for it was a damp, dark, dreary morning.

Crowds of sightseers thronged the pavements outside, waiting and watching, palpably animated by their curiosity to witness one of the acts in this sensational drama of real life that had already proved so thrilling, and that had yet to be played out.

There were more crowds outside the cemetery gates, through which only members of the funeral party were admitted; and open expressions of surprise and disappointment were exchanged at the smallness of the

cortège : only a couple of motor-cars and some half-dozen taxicabs followed the flower-laden hearse.

"She doesn't seem to have had any personal friends," remarked Bowden, one of the pressmen who had shared Austin's taxi. "I should have thought some of the big pots—or of Sir Robert's relatives—would have had the decency to come on. There's Twining, the lawyer—who's the old man beside him?"

"Sir Robert's valet—sort of confidential attendant. His name's Thomson," said Austin.

Thomson, decorous and unperturbed as usual, appeared in fact to be acting as a sort of major-domo, and was giving low-voiced instructions to the undertaker's men as they deftly removed the masses of flowers that covered the coffin. One of them handed him a large heart fashioned of purple blossoms, which he carried carefully in both hands, as he moved to a position close to the open grave, and to the priests in their imposing vestments.

"Who are the others?" whispered Starr's companion. "Servants too? They look like foreigners. Didn't see 'em at the church."

He indicated two groups that had assembled each side the grave, from which the pressmen stood a little apart.

"Don't know," Austin returned curtly, with a gesture imposing silence.

That was not entirely true; for with the group on the right, some eight or nine poorly clad men and women, with white, earnest, grief-stricken faces, was Boris Melikoff, holding in his right hand a single branch of beautiful crimson lilies.

"Russian refugees, and they are the real mourners," Austin said to himself, and scanned each face in turn searchingly. Did any one of them know the grim secret he was determined to discover? Could any one of them, man or woman, be the actual murderer? It seemed unlikely—even impossible—as he noted their sorrow,

restrained, indeed, with touching dignity, and therefore apparently the more deep and sincere.

He turned his gaze on the other group—three persons only, a man and two women. The man was Cacciola, a stately, impressive figure, his fine head bared, his long, grey locks stirred by the chill, damp breeze. His dark eyes were fixed anxiously on his beloved Boris, but he showed no other sign of emotion.

The short woman who clung weeping to his arm, her face concealed by an enormous black-bordered handkerchief, was undoubtedly his housekeeper, old Giulia.

And the third? Austin caught his breath quickly as he looked at her, just managing to check the involuntary exclamation that rose to his lips.

She was one of the most beautiful creatures he had ever seen, quite young, probably not more than seventeen, Italian certainly; no other country could produce that vivid, passionate type, that exquisite contour of cheek and throat, that delicate olive skin, birthright of daughters of the sun, those wonderful, tawny eyes shadowed by the long, black lashes.

She was dressed in deep mourning, with a voluminous black veil flung back from her face and falling nearly to the hem of her skirt, but that sombre garb was the only sign of grief about her; it seemed to enhance rather than dim her radiant youth.

There was something triumphant, almost insolent, about her, on such a scene. She stood erect, her graceful head thrown back a little, her full, curved lips slightly parted, her eyes, like those of Cacciola, fixed on Boris Melikoff with an ardent, passionate, self-revealing gaze. She seemed utterly oblivious of every one and everything else, and as he watched her Austin Starr was momentarily oblivious of every one but her.

He was only vaguely aware that the priest's sonorous voice ceased; but a moment later he was startled by a

swift change in the girl's face. It darkened, as a summer sky sometimes darkens at the advent of a thunder-cloud ; her black eyebrows contracted, so did her red lips, the love-light vanished from her eyes ; he could have sworn that they flashed red. For a moment the face was transformed to that of a fiend incarnate, obsessed by anger, hatred, jealousy.

Instinctively he looked around to see what had caused this extraordinary emotion, and saw that something had happened by the grave. The Russian group had closed up around Melikoff, towards whom the priests and Mr. Twining had turned as if in shocked remonstrance, while the men who were in the very act of lowering the coffin had paused, and the great purple heart of flowers lay, face downwards, right on the margin of the moss-lined grave.

"What's up ? " he asked the man next him—he whom he had silenced a few minutes before.

"Didn't you see ? The old man laid the heart on the coffin just at the last moment, and that tall, dark, foreign chap stepped forward, chucked it aside, and put those red lilies he had on it. The others pulled him back, and—look—he's crying or fainting or something. Queer, eh ? "

Even as he spoke Thomson, who alone seemed to have retained his composure, lifted the heart and replaced it, but below the lilies, and signed to the men to proceed with their task.

The whole thing passed in a few seconds, the priest proceeded with the last sentences, and pronounced the benediction, and Starr, his brain awl with wild conjectures, looked once more at the girl.

She was standing with bowed head and downcast eyes, in an attitude of reverence, her hands clasped on her breast, and he wondered if his eyes had deceived him just now. Then he noticed that one of her black gloves was split right across—plain to see even at that distance, for her white hand gleamed through the rent—and knew he

had not been mistaken. She had clenched her hands in that spasm of fury. The glove was evidence !

She loved Boris Melikoff ; she hated that dead woman with a hatred that even the grave could not mitigate.

Was this the clue he sought ? Who was she ? What was her connexion with Cacciola—with Melikoff ? He must learn that without delay.

Cacciola was already hastening towards Boris and his friends, while the girl remained with Giulia, and Austin would have followed, but was intercepted by Mr. Twining, the lawyer, who had held a brief colloquy with Thomson, and now hurried up to the little group of journalists.

“ Mr. Starr ? I believe you and these gentlemen are representatives of the Press ? I represent Sir Robert Rawson on this solemn occasion, and, speaking in his name, I beg of you not to give any publicity to the painful little incident you have just witnessed—I mean the incident with the flowers. It cannot be of any public interest whatever, and its publication would add to the distress of Sir Robert and—er—possibly of others. Can I rely upon you not to mention it ? ”

The undertaking was given, of course, and the journalists hurried off, with the exception of Austin, detained this time by Thomson.

“ I beg your pardon, sir, but I should like a few minutes’ conversation, and as I know you are pressed for time, would you accept the use of the car, one of Sir Robert’s that I am to return in, and permit me to accompany you ? We can drive straight to your destination.”

Austin accepted with alacrity, and they entered a closed car, which had come laden with flowers, whose heavy, sickly fragrance still clung about it.

“ I am sure you will excuse the liberty, sir,” said Thomson, in his precise, respectful way. “ I would have liked to have a word with you yesterday when you called on Sir Robert, but it was impossible.”

Austin nodded, wondering what was coming. Some-

what to his surprise, Thomson had been present at the interview yesterday, at Sir Robert's own request, standing silently behind his master's chair.

"It's about Mr. Carling, sir. I can't think why the police should have arrested him of all people in the world—such a nice young gentleman as he is. He had no more to do with my lady's death than you had!"

"Of course he hadn't. But, see here, Thomson, do you know anything of his movements that morning?"

"Nothing at all, sir, beyond what every one else knows, or will know soon. But how anybody acquainted with him can believe it for a minute beats me—my master most of all. I have presumed to speak to him about it—I've been with Sir Robert many years, sir—but he wouldn't hear a word, even from me. He says Mr. Carling followed and murdered my lady so as to get those papers back; he told the police so!"

"I don't believe the papers had anything to do with it."

Thomson, who was sitting forward on the edge of the seat, his black-gloved hands resting on his knees, turned his head slowly and looked at Austin sideways, for the first time during the colloquy.

"Nor I, sir. I hold that it was a thief, who got rid of the papers as soon as possible."

"It might have been a vendetta!"

"I beg your pardon, sir, a what?"

"Someone who had a grudge against Lady Rawson and watched for the chance of killing her?"

"That hadn't struck me, sir," said Thomson after a reflective pause.

"It struck me. Do you know anything about Mr. Melikoff and his associates?"

"The young gentleman who was so upset just now? Only that he was related to my lady and they used to meet, as Sir Robert was aware," Thomson replied, and Austin had the impression that he was lying, though why he could not imagine. "I fear there's no light in that direction,

sir. And Mr. Melikoff was not even in London at the time."

"I wasn't thinking of him, but whether there might be someone, who knew them both," said Austin, with that girl's beautiful, passionate face still vividly in remembrance. But he could not question the old man about her. Some instinct, which at the moment he did not attempt to analyse, forbade him.

"What did you want to tell me?" he asked bluntly, as the swift car was nearing Fleet Street and Thomson had relapsed into silence.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I was forgetting. I took the liberty, knowing that you are a friend of Mr. Carling's, merely to ask if you could possibly convey my respects to him, and to the poor young lady his wife, and my best wishes that they will soon be restored to each other."

"I'll do it with pleasure. Thank you, Thomson. Good day."

"Queer old coon," he thought, as he dashed up to his room. "So that was all he wanted. Very decent of him though."

Then he concentrated on his work. He was just through when Winnie rang him up, to say that Grace and her father had returned to the flat and were anxious to see him that evening, if possible.

"I'll come round about nine, dear—perhaps earlier; but I've to see someone first."

After a minute's cogitation he rang up Cacciola. A woman's voice answered—a delightful voice, rich and soft—in fluent English, with a mere intonation (it was slighter than an accent) that betrayed the speaker's nationality.

"Signor Cacciola is away from home. Will you give a message?"

A dull flush rose to Austin's face, a queer thrill passed through him.

"Oh, I'm sorry! Who is speaking? Is it Signora Giulia?"

"No. She also is not present. I am Maddelena Cacciola. What is the message?"

"I'd rather tell it to the *maestro* himself. When will he be home?"

"Not till—oh, very late."

"Then is Mr. Melikoff home?"

"No. He also is out with my uncle."

"I see. I'm sorry to have troubled you, signorina. I'll ring up again to-morrow."

"Will you not tell me your name?"

"Austin Starr. But he may not remember it."

"I will tell him, Mr. Starr. Good-bye."

He replaced the receiver, and again sat in thought, drumming softly with his fingers on the table.

So she was Cacciola's niece, and was living, or at least staying, with him, under the same roof as Boris Melikoff.

What a voice! Worthy of her face, her eyes. And a beautiful name too; he found himself repeating it in a whisper: "Maddelena!"

CHAPTER XV

AUSTIN'S SILENCE

"**I** CAN'T understand it, Winnie. It seems almost as if every one—like mother—had already made up their minds that—that Roger——"

Grace broke off. She could not bring herself to utter the words "that Roger is guilty." But Winnie understood.

"Nonsense, dear. There are you and I and George and your father and Austin on his side to begin with, and Mr. Spedding of course——"

"I don't know about Mr. Spedding," said Grace slowly, her hands clasped round her knees, her troubled eyes fixed on the fire. "I was with him all the afternoon, you know—there is so much to discuss and to arrange—and I thought his manner very reserved, very strange, and—and uneasy."

"That's only because he's a lawyer. They're always mysterious. What did he say?"

"Well, when I told him the simple truth as Roger told it me—as to why he followed Lady Rawson, and how it was he was so late at the church, he said, in quite an offhand way, that he knew all about that, and Roger would of course embody it in his statement at the proper time; but that his—Roger's—unsupported account of his own movements was no use as evidence! You can't think what a shock it gave me, Winnie; it was the way he said it. And then he explained that 'fortunately the onus of proof rests with the prosecution, and not with the defence: it is for them to prove him guilty, not for

us to prove him innocent.' “ ‘*Fortunately,*’ mind you ; and in a tone that implied that it would be quite impossible to prove my darling’s innocence ! Now what do you think of that ? ”

“ That it was his silly, pompous old legal way of talking and nothing to be upset about,” said Winnie, with a fine assumption of confidence.

“ Perhaps—but it hurt ! He hopes to secure Cummings-Browne for the defence.”

“ Of course. Austin says there’s no one to touch him.”

“ For the defence,” Grace repeated drearily. “ Oh, Winnie ! I suppose it was foolish, but I felt quite sure when I went out this morning that it was only a matter of a few hours and Roger would be free ; and now, nothing done ; just adjourned till after the inquest ; and then—and then—— Mr. Spedding takes it for granted that he will be committed for trial—kept in prison for weeks, months, till after Christmas, for the trial cannot come on till January. My Roger ! ”

She hid her face in her hands and for the moment Winnie was dumb, unable to find words of comfort.

All that long day Grace had borne herself bravely. Betimes in the morning she had gone to Spedding’s office, and thence, with the lawyer, to the police court, where, in a private room, she had a brief half-hour with Roger—only five minutes or so alone with him, for they had to consult with Mr. Spedding ; but those five minutes were precious indeed.

Roger was pale, but cheery and confident ; and she managed to appear the same for his sake.

“ I’m staying with Winnie for the present, dearest,” she told him. “ Mother was—well, a little difficult yesterday, so I thought it best. But I’m going to take possession of the flat—our flat—as soon as possible, and get it ready for you to come home to, or we’ll get it ready together if you come to-day—to-morrow.”

“ Not so soon I fear, darling. The law moves

cumbrously. But you can't go to the flat alone. Why not stay with Winnie ? ”

“ I'd rather be in—our own home,” she whispered, “ getting it straight for us both, beloved. I shall be happier, and you will seem nearer. Winnie will come in and out, of course ; and you'll come soon—very soon—and all will be well again, and all this will have passed like a bad dream ! ”

She smiled at him and he at her, and none but themselves knew how hard it was to summon those brave smiles to their lips when their hearts were almost breaking.

Then her father arrived, the gentle, careworn, grey-haired professor, who had travelled all night to be with her ; and she smiled at him, too, and sat with her hand in his, and Winnie Winston on the other side, through the ordeal of the police court ; sat with her eyes fixed on Roger most of the time, utterly unconscious of the scrutiny and whispered comments of the fashionably dressed women who had literally fought their way into the court in ghoulish anticipation of sensation.

The ordeal to-day was not prolonged, for, to the manifest disappointment of the assemblage of female ghouls, only a brief statement of the charge and formal evidence of arrest were given, and an adjournment asked for and granted.

The remainder of that dark, wet day was passed in a series of conferences with her father, and with the lawyers, all more or less painful, all important ; but throughout she managed to maintain an appearance of cheerfulness and confidence, telling herself the while that she must be brave and strong and clear-headed, “ for Roger's sake.”

But now, alone with Winnie in the cosy drawing-room at Chelsea, came reaction. She felt and looked utterly exhausted, unutterably anxious and sorrow-stricken.

Her father had gone home, but was to return after dinner to discuss a vital matter—how, among them, they were to raise money for the defence. Mr. Spedding had

named five thousand pounds as the least amount necessary. It must be raised, but how none of them knew at present. Roger's salary had been a generous one, but he had no private means, no near or wealthy relatives, and only a very few hundred pounds at call—which had seemed an ample reserve wherewith to start housekeeping, as they had already furnished the charming little flat in Buckingham Gate which was to be their first home.

Grace herself had a tiny income, only just over a hundred a year, a legacy from an aunt, but it was strictly tied up under a trustee, and she could not touch the principal.

Therefore this question of money was a new and terrible difficulty that must be surmounted somehow.

In any other conceivable emergency they would have had Sir Robert Rawson to back them, with his enormous wealth and influence; but now he was their enemy, able to bring all his resources against them.

"I can't understand it all," Grace resumed presently. "It seems as if we had become entangled, in a moment, in a great web of evil. But *why*? What have we done or left undone to deserve it? Roger *did* distrust that poor thing—disliked her in a way, simply because of the distrust. But he would never have harmed her, or any living creature. And yet they fix on him of all people, just because he happened to be near at hand, and to be concerned with those papers!"

"That's only because, as Austin says, they're just a lot of guys who can't see as far as their own silly noses. And he's on the trail anyhow, so cheer up, darling. Everything's going to come right soon perhaps. You trust Austin!"

Grace sighed and glanced restlessly at the clock.

"I wish he'd come."

"Here he is—that's his ring," said Winnie, and hurried out to answer the front door bell.

Austin it was, and she questioned him in an eager undertone as he took off his coat in the little hall.

"Any news?"

"Not yet. I've been on duty all day, dear. Only just free. I rang up Cacciola, but he wasn't in, or I'd have gone around to his place instead of coming here. How's Grace?"

"Terribly down, though she's been so plucky all day. Come along. She's dying to see you!"

He was shocked at the change these few days had wrought in Grace. As he had been prevented from attending the wedding he had not seen her for nearly a fortnight. Her radiant girlhood had vanished; she looked ten years older, a woman scathed by sorrow; and yet it struck him that in some subtle way she had become more beautiful, or rather that her beauty was spiritualized.

In the brief interval before he entered she had pulled herself together—only with Winnie, her closest girl-friend, would she betray any sign of weakness—and greeted him with a smile that belied the tragic intensity of her grey eyes.

They had exchanged but a few sentences when there were other arrivals—her father, and Mr. Iverson the vicar, who somehow brought with him a breezy breath of comfort. Grace gave him both her hands.

"Oh, *padre*, how good to see you."

"You'd have seen me before if I'd known where to find you; but Mrs. Armitage was out when I called this afternoon, and I was just going round again when I met your father, and here we are. We've been talking hard all the way from the bus, and I know all about everything so far. Roger's keeping his heart up and so are you? Good!"

"Trying to, *padre*."

"You're going to, both of you, all the time, however long or short it is. It's a black streak, child, but the help and guidance will come day by day till you're through it and out into the sunshine again."

"I've been telling the vicar about this money trouble, darling," interposed Mr. Armitage, "and——"

"Just so; and we shall soon get over that. The house

will go into committee on ways and means, so come along. What's the state of the exchequer? "

" Roger has just over six hundred in the bank."

" Splendid, and your father can find another six fifty."

" Two hundred and fifty of that's from himself, Grace," said her father. " He insists."

" Now, look here, Armitage, that's sheer breach of confidence, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself! Let's be thankful I have it to spare—which wouldn't have been the case a year or two ago."

Then Austin after a rapid mental calculation, chimed in :

" Bully for you, *padre*! Put me down for the same to start, and I'll be able to raise as much again, or more in a week or two. I'd give every dollar, every red cent I have to help clear old Roger."

He exchanged a swift glance with Winnie, who nodded delighted approval. She knew perfectly well that his impulsive offer meant that their own wedding might have to be delayed perhaps for years, but that weighed as nothing with Roger's life and liberty in the opposite scale.

" George and I too," she said. " I've told Grace so already. I don't know how much yet, Mr. Iverson, but I've lots of engagements for Christmas and after—good ones, too—so I shall be quite rich."

The vicar beamed round at them all and rubbed the shining little bald circle on his crown in a way he had when he was pleased. That bald patch, set round with curly, iron-grey hair, was one of his innocent little vanities. It was perfectly natural, but it did look so like a real tonsure!

" Now isn't that capital! Nearly two thousand pounds in less than five minutes. Lots to go on with; and we shall get the rest long before it's wanted. 'Hope for the best and prepare to meet the worst,' is an excellent maxim."

His incorrigible optimism was infectious; it cheered them all as no amount of conventional and lugubrious sympathy could have done; and his acceptance of Roger's innocence as a fact that need not even be discussed, and

would assuredly be established, was an unspeakable comfort to Grace, whose loyal and sensitive soul had been so cruelly tortured by the doubt of others, and by her own mother's attitude above all.

He declared his conviction that the first theory advanced and then abandoned was the right one : that the deed had been committed by some casual miscreant, who would yet be discovered.

Austin said nothing of his own newer theory, to the secret surprise of both Winnie and Grace, who, however, followed his example, supposing he thought it best to keep silence for the present, even among themselves.

"How curious that Mr. Cacciola should be mixed up with it all, in a way," remarked the vicar.

"Do you know him, sir?" asked Austin quickly.

"Only slightly, but I like him immensely. He's a Catholic, of course—and a good one, I should say. I often encounter him on Sunday mornings, on his way from Mass; and we walk along and yarn in all amity so far as our road lies together. That's as things should be, to my mind! And he's really most generous—often comes to play and brings his pupils to our little parish concerts, as you know, Miss Winston.

Winnie nodded.

"Yes, the *maestro* is the kindest old thing imaginable, and so simple—not a bit of side."

"He's a genius," said the vicar. "And I think true genius always is simple. I met him this afternoon, of all places in the world in the post office itself."

"The post office?" cried Grace. "Not where—not Mrs. Cave's?"

"Yes. It was when I was on my way from your house, Armitage. I looked in for a chat with Mrs. Cave, and little Jessie, who really haven't got over the shock yet. It will be a long time before they do, and they talk of giving up the shop as soon as they can find another. No wonder."

"The telephone box is partitioned off now, by order of the police," said Austin.

"Yes, very necessary, of course; but awkward for the Caves, for it means that they have to go out at the shop door and in at the side one before they can get to their own rooms. I was just consoling the good lady—with the suggestion that now she would have more walks abroad and fresh air than she's had for years; no use condoling, you know, that would only make things seem worse than they are—when in comes Mr. Cacciola and his niece, one of the loveliest girls I've ever seen in my life."

"His niece! I didn't know he had one—not in England!" exclaimed Winnie.

"Nor I till now. But I think she must have been educated here, she speaks English so well; though possibly she has not been with him all the time. I should certainly have remembered her if I'd seen her before—such a remarkably beautiful girl. She's to make her *début* soon—as a violinist. And what do you suppose was their errand to-day? That young girl actually wanted to see the place where poor Lady Rawson was murdered, and worried her uncle till he brought her across and asked Mrs. Cave to show it them!"

"Morbidity isn't confined to young people," Mr. Armitage remarked.

"Quite so, but it's unhealthy in anyone, and very distressing in a girl like that. As a matter of fact, I went round with them myself. I offered to as Mrs. Cave was alone in the shop—Jessie was out; and I was glad of the opportunity, not from 'morbidity,' I assure you, but simply so that I could see the place for myself. It seems so incredible that anyone could be murdered like that in a shop actually full of people, and the murderer get clean away, unless you've seen the place. It might have been made on purpose—a regular death-trap—for the box is really in a narrow passage that at some time has been thrown into the shop, and the door of it opens outwards, towards the shop. Just beyond is the scullery-place, and I think it probable the murderer was lurking

there when Jessie Jackson came down to help her aunt. And close at hand, on the right, is the street door, through which he simply walked out."

"The police think he went out through the garden door," said Austin.

"Just like 'em. But they're wrong. Why? Because Sadler's cab was standing outside the *street* door, where it was the work of an instant to throw the bag through the window. If the criminal had gone down the garden and out at that door he'd have had to come all the way back to pass the cab. And he'd never have done that; he'd have bolted *down* the street."

"I guess you're right, vicar. And then he tried to steal the cab. Some nerve!"

"Wrong again. That was a bit of boyish mischief."

"What in thunder makes you say that?"

"Because I happen to know. It will all come out at the next hearing—inquest or police court, or both. However that's only a detail."

"What did the girl—the *maestro's* niece—say?" asked Winnie.

"Ah! Of course, I was speaking of them. She *said* very little, but, do you know, her manner rather shocked me. It takes a lot to do that! She seemed positively to gloat over that horrible, tragic, dark corner. Cacciola was quite distressed, and remonstrated with her—at least I'm sure he did, though he spoke in Italian, which I don't understand, and she answered him very briefly, in a passionate whisper, and then simply walked off, and Cacciola made a sort of incoherent apology and hurried after her. I couldn't help thinking there was something mentally wrong—a most grievous thing, especially in one so young and beautiful and talented."

Austin Starr sat listening intently, but neither then nor later, when the elder men had gone, did he say that he knew aught of Maddelena Cacciola, though why he kept silence he really did not know.

CHAPTER XVI

MADDELENA

"**G**IULIA, thou art a foolish old cow! I tell thee no harm will come to thee. It is but to make oath and tell the truth; that the young signor came here inquiring for Donna Paula, and went away, and that Withers brought thee later the little silver case, and thou gave it to the police. What is there in all that?"

In the beautifully appointed kitchen where usually Giulia reigned supreme Maddelena, attired in a morning wrapper of brilliant hues, was dividing her attention between preparing the breakfast coffee and alternately coaxing and scolding Giulia, who sat huddled in a chair, weeping and muttering prayers and protestations to every saint in the calendar.

She was to give evidence in the police court again that day—as she had already done at the inquest which had terminated in a verdict of wilful murder against Roger Carling—and nothing would induce the poor old woman to believe that the object of these interrogations was any other than to prove her guilty of stealing that silver cigarette case! That, she was convinced, was what "they of the police" were after, and the murder of "Donna Paula" was quite a secondary consideration.

Maddelena shrugged her pretty shoulders and went on with her task, setting a dainty breakfast-tray with a little silver service. For all her sharp words to Giulia, there was a smile on her lips, and her fine, capable white hands touched the inanimate things caressingly; for she was preparing that tray for Boris, who had not been out the

other evening—as she told Austin Starr on the telephone—but ill in bed. He had collapsed after that scene at the cemetery, and they had brought him home more dead than alive. As Giulia was so foolishly upset, Maddelena and her uncle had nursed the invalid, and already he was much better.

She turned brightly to Cacciola as he came into the kitchen.

“On the instant, for behold all is ready. Tell him he is to eat every morsel, on pain of my royal displeasure! How is he?”

“Very weak still, though he says he slept well,” said Cacciola, taking up the tray. “And he insists on coming with us to-day.”

Maddelena’s expressive face darkened.

“To the court? But what folly; there is no need, and he will make himself ill again,” she cried.

“I think not. Let him have his way, *carissima*, and he will get over it the sooner,” said Cacciola pacifically, and retreated with the tray down the long passage that led to Melikoff’s room.

The flat was a large one—two thrown into one in fact—for the *maestro* liked plenty of room. That was why he had settled in a suburb.

Maddelena stood frowning for a minute or more, then shrugged her shoulders again, administered a petulant shake to the sobbing Giulia, poured out a big cup of coffee, and handed it to the old woman, sternly bidding her drink it and cease her fuss, and finally sat down to her own breakfast, breaking her roll and dabbing on butter with angry, jerky movements, and scolding Giulia between mouthfuls.

But she showed no sign of ill-humour an hour later when she greeted Boris. Her manner now was of charming, protective, almost maternal, solicitude.

She looked very beautiful too, not in the mourning garb she had worn at the funeral, but in a handsome

furred coat of tawny cloth, almost the colour of her eyes, and a bewitching little hat to match.

Even Boris, worn, haggard, brooding resentfully on his tragic sorrow, summoned up a smile for her, as Cacciola, watching the pair of them, noticed with secret satisfaction.

"I ought to scold you, Boris, my friend," she said. "You are not fit to go out at all, and it will be such a trial for you. But, *altro*, you must have your way as usual! Give him your arm, uncle. Come, Giulia."

Outside the court they parted from the reluctant and trembling Giulia, leaving her in charge of the kindly postmistress, Mrs. Cave, who was also to give evidence, and promised to take charge of her in the witnesses' room.

A big crowd had assembled waiting for the public doors to open, but Cacciola and his companions were admitted through the official entrance, and given seats in the front row, just above and behind the solicitors' table.

A few minutes later such spectators as could be accommodated swarmed in, pushing for places; and presently the body of the little court began to fill up, as solicitors, clerks, and pressmen drifted in and took their places.

Boris Melikoff, on one side of Cacciola, sat with his hands in his pockets, his chin sunk on his breast, giving no heed to anyone at present; but Maddelena, on the other side, watched with lively though decorous interest, whispering many questions and comments to her uncle.

"That is Mr. Starr, a journalist," said Cacciola as Austin appeared and betook himself to the Press table.

"He who spoke with me on the telephone? He is very good-looking. I think I like him! Ah, he sees us!"

For Austin, surveying the eager, curious faces of the crowd, again mainly composed of smart women, saw the group in front, and exchanged a nod of greeting with Cacciola. Then his eyes met Maddelena's frank, inquiring gaze. For several seconds—that seemed longer to Austin—they looked full at each other, till she drooped her long, black lashes demurely, her lips relaxing in a faint smile.

The startled admiration she thought she discerned in his glance amused and did not surprise her. She was used to creating such an impression, for, though not in the least vain, she was fully conscious of her beauty. She did not imagine that he had ever seen her before, and that his interest in her was deeper and more complex than that which an exceptionally pretty girl inspires in most men, young or old.

When she stole another glance at him he was no longer looking in her direction, but was listening with frigid courtesy to a fair-haired woman in a seal coat and expensive hat, who had just come in with a tall, thin, grey-haired man, and was looking up coquettishly into Austin's glum face, as she spoke in a rapid undertone.

"Who is that?" demanded Maddelena.

"Mrs. Armitage and her husband—Mrs. Carling's mother and father," said Cacciola.

Mrs. Armitage it was, who, having realized that as a close connexion of the two central figures in this poignant drama of life, she was a person of importance in the eyes of the public, had decided that it was her duty to attend the court; and already, with much complacence, had permitted herself to be "snapped" by several Press photographers lying in wait outside, and had assumed a most pathetic expression in the hope that it would "come out well."

Maddelena noted every detail of her attire and manner, and with keen feminine intuition summed her up accurately on the instant. "So. If the daughter is like the mother then I, for one, will spare no sympathy for her," she decided.

Cacciola touched her arm.

"Behold, here is Mrs. Carling. The poor girl, my heart bleeds for her. Miss Winston is with her. That is good."

There was a buzz and flutter, as necks were craned in the endeavour to see Grace Carling's face, but she kept her heavy veil down, and appeared absolutely unconscious of the presence of those inquisitive onlookers, as she

gravely accepted her mother's effusive greeting, and then seated herself with her back to the crowd, where she would have an uninterrupted view of her husband when he should be brought into the dock.

Winnie Winston became the centre of attention for the moment, as, seeing Cacciola, she made her way across to speak to him, and unashamedly every one in the vicinity tried to overhear. Only Melikoff maintained his sullen, brooding attitude. He had come there to-day to see but one person, Roger Carling, the enemy whom he hated.

"How is Mrs. Carling?" asked Cacciola.

"Very well, and wonderfully brave," said Winnie. "They both are, as they should be, for he is innocent, *maestro*. But it is terrible for us all. Is this your niece? I have heard of her, but we haven't met before."

He introduced the girls, and Maddelena leant down over the barrier and spoke with charming courtesy.

"My uncle talks so much of you, Miss Winston. You are—oh, one of his great favourites. I wish we had met more happily. I have just returned from Milan, into all this sorrow. It is too sad!"

"Ought Mr. Melikoff to be here? He looks very ill," said Winnie, with a glance at Boris; and Maddelena looked at him, too, her eyes softening, as they always did when they regarded him.

"Alas! he would come, though I and my uncle sought to dissuade him; but he is very obstinate, our poor Boris, and distracted with grief. But he will—he must—recover in time."

Winnie nodded sympathetically and retreated, much to the relief of Austin Starr, who from the distance had watched the incident uneasily, though why he should be disturbed he could not have said. But thenceforth, for the greater part of that grim day, he concentrated his attention chiefly on those three, feeling more and more convinced that they presented a psychological problem which, if it could be solved, would elucidate the mystery

of Paula Rawson's murder. When Roger Carling was brought into the dock Starr saw Boris Melikoff sit up, as if galvanized into life, his white face set like a fine, stern mask, his dark eyes, feverishly brilliant, fixed relentlessly on the prisoner's face.

So far as Austin's observation went, Roger was quite unaware of that fierce, fanatical stare, and of all the other eyes focused upon him. With head erect he listened with grave attention as the case against him was stated by the prosecution, and later supported in nearly every detail by the many witnesses. Usually he watched each speaker in turn, and in the intervals his eyes always sought those of Grace, in silent and spiritual communion that gave strength and courage to them both. At those moments husband and wife were as unconscious of the crowded court, of the whispered glances of the spectators, as if they had been transported to another world which held none but themselves.

Maddelena could not see Grace Carling's face, but she watched Roger as intently as Austin Starr watched her.

As he watched, Austin's perplexity increased. At first her expressive face revealed a most curious emotion, in which there was no trace of the hatred and resentment betrayed so plainly by Boris Melikoff, or of the fury that had distorted it by Paula Rawson's grave. On the contrary, she looked at Roger admiringly, exultantly, as women look at a hero who has done some great deed. Austin felt that he really would not have been surprised if she had clapped and cheered !

Now, why on earth should she look at Roger Carling like that ?

But presently her face changed and softened, became gravely thoughtful. She sat very still, leaning forward, her elbows on the rail in front of her, her chin resting on her clasped hands, her dark brows contracted, and Austin thought he read in her wonderful eloquent eyes doubt, dismay, increasing anxiety, and a great compassion.

What was in her mind? What did she know—or conjecture?

That was what he must endeavour to discover.

Dispassionately, inexorably, the case was stated by the prosecution, based, as nearly every murder charge must be, on circumstantial evidence.

There were the undisputed facts that the prisoner had followed and endeavoured to see Lady Rawson, with the intention of recovering the stolen papers which he believed to have been—and were now known to have been—in her possession; that he had been close at hand at the moment the murder must have been committed, though none of the people who were in and out of the shop at the time, and who had all been traced and summoned as witnesses, could swear to having seen him. There was the agreement of time and place; even allowing for the delay caused by the fog, there was ample time for him to reach the church, "late and agitated" as he undoubtedly was, after committing the crime.

Above all, there, on the table, was the possible—nay, almost certainly the actual—weapon employed; one of the two pocket knives found on the prisoner at the time of his arrest. It was a flat, tortoiseshell penknife, of which the larger blade, of finely tempered steel, keen as a razor, constituted, in the opinion of the surgical experts, precisely the sort of instrument with which the wound was inflicted. The other knife—a thick blunt blade—was out of the question, part of a "motorist's compendium," fitted with several other small tools, none of which could inflict just such a wound.

Sadler, the taxi-driver, who had a bandage round his head and still looked shaky as a result of his smash up, identified the prisoner as the gentleman he had driven from Grosvenor Gardens to Rivercourt Mansions, having already picked him out unhesitatingly from among a number of other men.

Sadler's further story was perfectly straightforward.

Having deposited his fare, and finding himself so close to the house of his sweetheart, Jessie Jackson, he drove slowly across to the post office, saw, through the window, Jessie in the shop with her aunt, guessed that in a few minutes she would be going up to dinner, and they would have the chance of a few words together, so pulled up in the side street, just by the house door, and out of sight from the shop, and smoked a "gasper" while he waited.

Presently he got down, had another squint into the shop, saw Mrs. Cave was now alone, so sounded his horn, "in a sort of signal we have," and Jessie immediately came down and let him in at the side door. How long he was up in the kitchen with her he couldn't say—not exactly—till her aunt called her down.

Then he waited for another few minutes, till he thought he heard someone "cranking up" his cab; ran downstairs, and sure enough the cab was disappearing down the street.

He went after it, and round the corner, just by the waterworks, found it standing, the engine still going, and saw a "nipper" running away.

He jumped to his seat, followed the boy, and, turning the corner, crashed right into a lorry, and that was all he knew till he came to himself in hospital.

Story corroborated by Jessie Jackson, Jim Trent—a bright faced mischievous schoolboy, who had himself owned up to the police that, seeing the cab unattended, he couldn't resist the temptation of trying to start and drive it, but soon pulled up and "hooked it," exactly as Sadler had said—and several people who had seen the chauffeur in wrathful pursuit of the cab.

At this stage the court rose for lunch, and Austin Starr went across for a word with Cacciola.

Already Maddelena had changed places with her uncle, and was speaking softly to Boris, who, the moment Roger Carling disappeared from sight, had sunk down in his former attitude, looking utterly exhausted.

Starr could not hear what she said, but she seemed to be remonstrating with him, tenderly and anxiously, while from her big brocaded bag she produced a thermos flask, poured out a cup of fragrant Russian tea—it smelt as if it was laced with brandy as well as lemon!—and coaxed him to drink, just as a mother might coax a sick and fretful child.

She was far too absorbed to spare a glance or a thought for anyone else at the moment, and Austin took himself off, having no time to waste, and having achieved his immediate purpose—an appointment with Cacciola at Rivercourt Mansions that evening. He was most anxious to begin a near study of that “psychological problem” of which Maddelena Cacciola was the most perplexing—yes, and the most attractive element!

CHAPTER XVII

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM

IT was fairly late that evening when Austin Starr arrived at Cacciola's, having had a hasty meal at a restaurant when he was through with his day's work.

He had been obliged to decline the *maestro's* hospitable invitation to dinner, and had been assured by the old man that it did not matter how late he turned up: "I am not what the English call an early bird!"

Cacciola himself, arrayed in dressing-gown and slippers and carrying a big curved meerschaum pipe in his hand, admitted and welcomed him cordially.

There was no one else in the spacious sitting-room, but Austin's quick sense of disappointment was speedily banished by his host.

"Sit down, my friend. You will find that chair comfortable. Now, will you have wine—it is here ready? Or wait for the coffee which my Maddelena will bring soon? She is now preparing it."

"Coffee for me, thank you, sir."

"And none makes it better than Maddelena," said the old man, settling himself in his own great chair, and resuming his pipe. "It is well indeed for us all that she is at home at this time, for, alas! we are a sick household, with Boris and my poor old Giulia so much distressed by this terrible event, which touched us so nearly through our poor Boris."

"It's a great and awful mystery that I'd give my right hand to solve," said Austin bluntly.

Cacciola looked at him with grave surprise.

"Say a tragedy, yes. But where is the mystery? There is no doubt of the guilt of that unhappy young man."

"Doubt! Man alive, Roger Carling is as innocent as I am; I'd stake my life on that! He's been committed for trial, I know—one couldn't expect anything else at present—but——"

He checked himself. After all, he had come here in search of a clue, and must say nothing that might put Cacciola on his guard.

"Now that is strange," mused Cacciola. "Maddelena has been saying the same ever since we returned from the court, simply because she has decided that he does not look like a murderer—a woman's reason!"

"I haven't had the pleasure of meeting your niece yet. Does she live with you, sir?"

"It is her home, and has been these many years, since my brother died and left her in my charge. She and my poor Boris are to me as children. But she has not been at home except for holidays since she went to school; she has been educated here in England, and since two years has been studying in Milan. She should be there now, the naughty one, but the moment she heard the news of this terrible thing she came back, travelling night and day. I was vexed, yes; with a musician, music should always come first, and her impulse will retard her career; but I do not know what we should have done without her. None can manage Boris and our old Giulia as Maddelena does," he added with an indulgent smile.

"Is that so? She's evidently a very capable as well as a very charming young lady. Is she a singer, sir?" said Austin, conscious of a curious sense of relief. What dark suspicions had been in his mind ever since he saw that fury of hatred in the girl's face as she stood by Paula Rawson's grave he had not dared to formulate, even in thought, but they had been there, and now Cacciola's words had dispersed them so far as Maddelena was con-

cerned. However much she hated the dead woman, she could have had no hand in her death.

Yet he was still convinced that here, in this quaint Bohemian household, the heart of the mystery was hidden. How was he to discover it? At present all he could do was to cultivate his friendship with the genial, simple-minded old *maestro*, whom he was learning to like immensely. At the back of his mind he was secretly ashamed of employing this plan. It was a low-down trick, yet the only course that seemed possible at present. And Roger Carling's life was in the balance: that grim fact overshadowed all other considerations!

Cacciola shook his head and shrugged his shoulders with a whimsical air of resignation.

"Alas! no. She has a voice indeed which, compared with most English voices for instance, would pass as good. But a Cacciola who sings must excel, and my Maddelena will never excel——"

"As a singer! My uncle is on his old grievance," said Maddelena herself, as she entered carrying the coffee-tray, and flashed an amused glance from one to the other.

"Aha! What is the proverb about listeners never hearing any good of themselves?" chuckled Cacciola. "This is my little girl, Mr. Starr; and if she had come an instant later she would have heard something nicer, for one of these days she is going to be a great violinist."

"So my uncle says; but we shall see," laughed Maddelena, setting the tray on a low, carved stand, and giving Austin her hand, and continuing more seriously: "I am so glad you have come to-night, Mr. Starr, for I have heard so much of you, and there are, oh, so many things I want to ask you about. You are a great friend of that poor Mr. Carling and his bride, are you not? The poor young lovers, how my heart is grieved for them! But we must have our coffee first and then we will talk."

There was something so frank and charming in her manner, so like her uncle's, in its easy, gracious simplicity,

that again Austin marvelled, remembering her in that unguarded moment the other day. Was she merely a creature of passionate impulse or a consummate actress?

"I am very much the maid-of-all-work these days," she explained, seating herself between them on a big "humpty." "For Giulia—you know her?"

"Your old servant, yes, I have seen her."

"She is still in such a state of nerves that she is no use at all. It is very foolish of her."

"Have patience, *carissima*; she will get over it in time. We all shall," said Cacciola soothingly.

"I suppose Mrs. Giulia was very fond of Lady Rawson?" hazarded Austin.

Maddelena turned towards him, raising her dark brows.

"Fond of her? No, indeed. Why should she be?"

"I don't know. But I thought, as she seemed to be fairly intimate with you all——"

"Paula Rawson intimate with *us*!"

There was a note of indignant protest in her rich voice, and her eyes flashed stormily. Austin metaphorically "sat up," and Cacciola cast a deprecating glance at the girl.

"I'm sorry if I've said anything wrong, Miss Maddelena; but it seems she did come here very frequently, so I naturally thought——"

"Come here, yes, indeed, and far too often," said Maddelena with emphasis. "But not to see *us*. She came to see Boris, her cousin; not because she loved him—Paula Rawson was not capable of loving anyone—but because she wanted him as a tool for her ambitions, for her intrigues. She was ruining him, body and soul!"

Cacciola interposed, almost sternly: "Peace, Maddelena. We must speak with charity of the dead!"

"That is my uncle all over. Oh, yes, 'speak with charity, think with charity!' For me, I cannot, I will not, when I think of Paula Rawson. I am glad she is dead. If I made any other pretence I should be a hypocrite.

This is the truth, Mr. Starr—my uncle knows it, though he will not say so now. We were so happy together, he and I and Boris, a year ago, when I came home from Milan for the winter vacation. You, who have only seen Boris as he is now, cannot imagine what he was then—what he was to us both. And his voice ! ”

“ Ah ! she is right,” sighed Cacciola. “ It was divine, but the voice is there still, my child, the saints be praised, and when he recovers he will sing once more, better than ever perhaps, and be his old self once again.”

“ Perhaps. Because Paula Rawson is dead and can trouble him no more,” cried Maddelena. “ He met her, she whom he had thought dead, as would to heaven she had been—and, lo, we became as nothing to him : his voice, his career became as nothing ! He lived only for her, to do her bidding, to see her from time to time ; plotting for their country, they said. Pouff ! He had forgotten his country until he met her—Paula—again, and fluttered round her like a moth round a candle, singeing his wings. Well, that candle has been put out, just in time to save him being burnt up ! ”

Cacciola shifted uneasily in his chair, but did not venture on further expostulation.

“ Do you know any of their Russian friends, Miss Cacciola ? ” asked Austin.

She shook her head.

“ They used to come and go like shadows, seeing only Boris, and whoever might chance to admit them when he did not—Giulia or my uncle usually. She—Paula—actually had a key, and could let herself into this, *our* home, if you please, whenever she liked. I was always furious about it, as was Giulia, and my uncle did not like it. He should have forbidden it, as I told him a hundred times.”

“ She had a key ! ” exclaimed Austin. “ Did she use it that last time she was here ? ”

“ I do not know. Why do you ask ? ”

"Because if she did it ought to have been found either in her purse or her bag, and certainly it was not there."

"That is curious," said Maddelena reflectively. "I will find out from Giulia to-morrow; she is in bed now. You think that is of importance?"

"Every little thing is of importance. See here, Miss Cacciola——"

"Well?" she asked, her bright eyes fixed inquiringly upon him, as he hesitated, wondering if, and how far, he should confide in her. Cacciola still remained silent but was listening intently.

"It's this way," Austin resumed slowly, weighing each word before he spoke. "Roger Carling is innocent. A good few of us—every one who really knows him, in fact, except Sir Robert Rawson himself—are convinced of that, although appearances are so terribly against him."

"I too, since I watched him in the court to-day," she murmured.

"I know. The *maestro* told me so just before you came in. Now we've got to find out the truth, to trace the murderer, before the trial comes on, and we've only a very few weeks to do it in. It's no use going to the police, unless and until we've something definite to put them on. They think the case is clear and their duty done."

"But you—there is something in your mind?"

"There is, but I don't quite know how to explain it. I believe this Russian business may provide the clue, and that you can help to find it. Just suppose there was one of them who had a personal grudge against her—or even a spy in their councils, for there always is a spy, sure, in these intrigues."

"Or someone who wanted to separate her from Boris," said Maddelena dryly, and he was thankful that she was now gazing at the fire and not at him. "Well, I and my uncle wanted to do that. He is sorry the separation has been brought about with such tragedy, but I—I care not

how it came about so that it did come. I wonder you did not suspect me, Mr. Starr ! ”

She turned and looked at him again, a sort of challenge in her eyes, which he met squarely.

“ Maddelena ! ” exclaimed Cacciola, glancing from one to the other, but neither heeded him at the moment.

“ Perhaps I did till I met you,” Austin answered. “ I don’t now, or I shouldn’t have asked your help.”

“ Good ! I like an honest man, and that is very honest, Mr. Starr. I also will be honest. I did not murder Paula Rawson, though there have been many times when I would have done so if I could. And I tell you that if I knew who did I would do all in my power to shield him.”

“ But not if an innocent man should suffer in his place,” he urged. “ Miss Cacciola, I implore you if you know anything—even if you suspect anything or anyone——”

“ I neither know nor suspect anything,” she interrupted decisively. “ I had not thought till to-day that there was any doubt. But you are right, the innocent must not suffer. I—we”—she glanced at her uncle—“will do all we can to help you.”

“ What can we do ? ” asked Cacciola perplexedly. “ I have heard you with much surprise, with much distress. I am grieved that Maddelena here is so hard ; she knows it. It is not like her, signor, for she is truly a loving child.”

He looked so thoroughly upset and miserable that with one of her swift impulses Maddelena sprang up, and bent over the back of his chair, putting her arms caressingly round him.

“ Never mind me, dear uncle. I love when I love and I hate when I hate ; I am made like that, and it cannot be helped. But Mr. Starr is right : we must do what we can to bring the truth to light.”

“ That’s so, Miss Cacciola. Now do either of you know the names of any of these Russians or where they live ? ”

“ I do not, nor you, uncle ? As I said, they came and went as they liked, and my uncle should have forbidden

it ; but he is so weak where Boris is concerned. And he is so sorry for them, as for all who are unfortunate." She gave him another hug, and resumed her seat, continuing : " Do you know he used to give them food if he was at home and knew they were there with Boris, slinking in by one and two after dark ? Well, he would bid Giulia make a good meal ; and she did, grumbling. But she was never permitted to take in the dishes—no, nor even to peep into the room. Boris always came and took them from her ! "

" What is a little food ? " protested Cacciola. " I do not believe there is any harm in these poor souls ; they are not Communists, but aristocrats who have escaped with their bare lives—whose lives are still perhaps in danger ; and of one thing I am certain : not one of them would have lifted his hand against Paula—she was their best friend."

" There may have been a spy among them for all that, as Mr. Starr suggested," said Maddelena. " And I promise you that I will find out all I can about them. Boris will tell me, if I go to work in the right way."

" I'm infinitely obliged to you, Miss Maddelena," said Austin earnestly.

" And now let us talk of something pleasanter. Will you have some more coffee ? Ah, it is cold ! Some wine, then. That will make my uncle more cheerful. Will you move the coffee-tray, Mr. Starr ? Set it on the piano—anywhere."

He jumped up to do her bidding, while she crossed to the corner cupboard. Taking the tray from the little carved stand, he glanced round the room, and noting a small table near the door moved towards it.

As he did so he saw the door, on which hung a heavy embroidered *portière*, gently closing. Next instant he remembered that Maddelena had certainly shut the door after her when she entered ; he had noticed the clever little backward kick with which she did so, and had heard

the click of the latch. None of them had been anywhere near the door since. Who then was outside ?

Striding swiftly across the room he dropped rather than set the tray on the table, sprang to the door and threw it wide open. The outer hall was dark and silent.

"Who is there ?" he demanded, and at the same moment Maddelena called from the other side the room:

"What is the matter, Mr. Starr ?"

"The door has been opened—someone has been listening," he said, stepping warily into the darkness and feeling for the electric switch. "Where is that switch ?"

"By the hall door, on the right," said Maddelena, hurrying to him, while Cacciola followed more slowly, shuffling in his big slippers.

He switched the light on. The small, square hall was empty but for themselves. Maddelena passed swiftly along and switched on another light that illuminated the two passages at the end that ran right and left. No one there either.

"I shut the door when I came in," she whispered.

"I know. I saw you," he answered as softly.

"And I left the light on in the hall—I had both my hands full. It must have been either Boris or Giulia. Uncle, go and see if Boris is up. I will go to Giulia," she said, motioning Austin to stay where he was.

He watched her go softly along the right-hand passage, open a door at the end, and switch on a light. From within the room, even at that distance, he could hear a sonorous snore.

Maddelena put out the light, closed Giulia's door, and beckoned to Austin to join her.

"She is fast asleep ; it could not have been she. I—I am frightened. Let us look in the other rooms."

They did so ; dining-room, kitchen, her own room—a charming one, next to Giulia's. No one lurking there.

They went back and found Cacciola doing the same in

the other wing, which once was a separate flat. He too looked very disturbed.

"Boris sleeps soundly, as he should do; he is under the doctor and had a sleeping draught to-night, and there is none other here but ourselves. Who can have been here?"

"I guess whoever it was has just walked out," said Austin, striding back to the front door. "Why didn't I think of that first?"

"Wait, the lights will be out there. Take my torch," counselled Cacciola, fumbling for it in his overcoat pocket.

Softly all three of them went down all those flights of stone stairs. Still no sign of anyone, no sound. They themselves were evidently, and as usual, the only occupants of the block who were up so late; but the street door was open.

"That is proof," whispered Maddelena. "It is always closed at eleven; after that we have to admit ourselves with our pass-key."

"How many keys to this door have you?" asked Austin, after looking out into the night and closing the door, latching it this time.

"Only one—my uncle has it; and if others are late they must rouse the porter."

"I wonder who has that missing key—the key you told me just now that Lady Rawson had, and lost," said Austin, when they had returned to the drawing-room. "Take my advice, Mr. Cacciola, and have a new lock to your front door to-morrow. And don't leave any spare keys around!"

CHAPTER XVIII

HARMONY—AND DISCORD

"IS that all, Mr. Starr?"

"It's something to go on, isn't it?" Austin countered. He had decided to take counsel with Snell upon that problem he was endeavouring to solve, and the detective had listened in silence to his account of the interview with Cacciola and Maddelena, and the curious incident that had terminated it.

"Well, if you want my opinion," said Snell dryly, "it is that you've discovered—or created—quite a nice little mare's nest."

"Now see here, Snell, you're simply prejudiced!"

"Not at all, Mr. Starr. If there's one thing I pride myself on more than another it is on never being prejudiced. And if you think I did not, at the very outset, satisfy myself—yes, and my superiors too—that neither Melikoff and his associates nor the old signor and his household had anything at all to do with the murder of Lady Rawson, I can only assure you that you're jolly well mistaken!"

"You've got it fixed up in your mind that Roger Carling is guilty, and you won't look any further," Austin said bitterly.

"I haven't. It's for a jury to decide whether he's guilty or innocent. And if you or anyone else can point to any clue in any other direction that I haven't followed up and sifted I'll go to work again instantly. As for the Russians——" He touched an electric button on his table, scribbled a few words on a card, and handed it to

the clerk who entered. "As you aren't inclined to believe me, and as I know you're to be trusted, I'm going to let you look through the dossiers for yourself. You mustn't make any notes, of course."

"That's very good of you. But what about the person who was in the flat?"

"Old Madam Giulia—queer old girl too; *what* a fuss she made in the witness-box, even for a foreigner!—or perhaps even Melikoff himself, who thought he'd like to hear what you were all yarning about, and scooted as soon as you moved."

"Impossible! Neither of them could have got down the long passage and into bed, apparently asleep, in the time. If I'd only thought of the hall door first we should have caught whoever it was. But I didn't, and we never heard a sound. The tray clattered some as I set it down or I'd have heard the click of the lock. And what about that key that Melikoff gave Lady Rawson and she lost, or gave away?"

"That's really the only point worth anything at all, and I doubt if it's worth much. What a fool Melikoff was to give her that key, and the old signor to allow it. That the lot?"—as the clerk re-entered bringing several neatly arranged sets of papers. "All right, leave them for the present. Now, Mr. Starr, here you are. Take your time."

He pushed the papers across the table to Austin, and resumed his own work.

Rapidly but methodically Austin ran through the dossiers one after another, his heart sinking as he did so. For Snell was right. They provided, with much other information, a complete record of the movements, on the day of the murder, of presumably every one of the group of refugees with whom Boris Melikoff was associated, compiled from personal interrogation of each and verified by further searching investigation. In the face of this no shadow of suspicion could fall on any one of them.

Almost mechanically he memorized the names and addresses—one never knew when such information might come in useful.

"Well?" asked Snell laconically as he finished.

"You're right, of course. I must say you've done the thing pretty thoroughly."

"As usual. Though the public, and some people who might be expected to know better, don't give us credit for it," said Snell dryly. "It was easy enough in this case, as they're all aliens and registered as such. We keep an eye on them all, as a matter of course, and we've known all there is to know about this lot ever since they landed. Quite a harmless lot, in my opinion."

"Yet you didn't know at the time that Lady Rawson was one of them," suggested Austin. "You told me so yourself."

"Quite so; but then she wasn't registered—not necessary as she became 'British' on her marriage."

"If their meetings were so harmless why did she steal those papers from her husband?"

"Ah, that's quite another question, Mr. Starr. Her motive doesn't matter in the least, so far as tracking her murderer is concerned; and if you hark back to the papers as a clue, why they lead straight to the one person—Mr. Roger Carling. And there you are!"

Austin leant his head on his hand in deep dejection.

"I'll never believe it was Roger Carling!"

Snell glanced at him kindly enough.

"Take my advice, Mr. Starr, don't go wearing yourself out trying to find fresh trails. They'll all turn out as false as this one. The only thing to be done is to leave it to the jury—or to chance. I've known a lot of mysteries cleared up by what seemed to be pure chance."

"There's still the notion of a casual thief," mused Austin.

"There is. And we're keeping that in sight I assure you. But I don't believe it was done by a wrong 'un down on his luck. Whoever it was wore gloves."

"How in thunder do you know that?" demanded Austin, genuinely surprised.

"Because there were smears on the bag caused by gloved fingers. If they'd been finger prints they'd have been hanging evidence! There were no such smears on the envelope, though."

"Any finger prints on it?" asked Austin quickly.

"Lots—from Carling's own to Lord Warrington's; it had been handled by half a dozen people at least—quite legitimately. Carling's prints, of course—though they're the clearest of the lot under the microscope—won't be regarded as evidence against him, as he was the first to handle and seal the envelope the night before. All that will be threshed out at the trial."

"I guess so. Well, I'm infinitely obliged to you, Mr. Snell," said Austin despondently.

"Wish I'd been able to help you," Snell responded as they shook hands.

Austin walked slowly along the Embankment in deep and distressed thought. This interview with Snell was a bitter disappointment; and now again he seemed up against a blank wall. There was still the mysterious visitant to the flat to be considered, but if he or she was traced that might prove nothing.

Outside Charing Cross Station he paused indecisively. He had an hour or two to spare. Should he go to Chelsea? He hadn't seen Winnie for over a week—not since that day at the police court when Roger was committed for trial—as she had been singing at Bristol and only returned yesterday. Or should he go to Cacciola's on the chance of finding anyone at home?

He would not acknowledge even in his own mind that by "anyone" he meant Maddelena. The girl attracted him most strongly, and in a manner that he did not choose to analyse. He did not love her—of that he was quite sure. He had never been of a susceptible nature where women were concerned; had always held to the high ideals

of love and marriage derived from a long line of Puritan ancestors, for he came of a sound New English stock. He loved Winnie Winston; he meant to marry her; would have been profoundly indignant at any suggestion that he could waver in his allegiance to her.

And yet at intervals ever since he first saw Maddelena Cacciola beside Paula Rawson's grave, and almost continuously since that evening when he had met and talked with her, that beautiful, vivid face, with its swift, passionate changes of expression, had haunted him, sleeping and waking, in a most perplexing and disturbing way!

He had not seen or spoken to her since, for though he had rung up several times, only Giulia had answered, to the effect that the signor and signorina were out.

As he turned into the station he tried to convince himself that he was going to Rivercourt Mansions merely to ascertain if the girl had been able to get any information from Boris, as she had undertaken to do, and not that he had any desire to meet her again; and all the time, at the back of his honest mind he was quite aware—and ashamed—of the subterfuge.

As he mounted the last of the long flights of stone stairs that led to Cacciola's eyrie he heard music from within—a glorious tenor voice, pure, passionate, thrilling—singing to a masterly accompaniment of piano and violin.

Outside the door he waited, listening intently and in sheer delight, wishing, indeed, that he had been within; but it was unthinkable to intrude the strident impertinence of an electric bell on that feast of harmony.

The voice ceased. There followed a beautiful little ascending passage on the violin, which he strained his ears to hear, a final grand chord on the piano. Then silence. He touched the bell at last, and instantly the door was opened by Giulia, who beamed a welcome to him and whispered:

“They make music once more. Go in, signor.”

Thus informally, and unannounced, he entered the big

room. Cacciola, seated at the piano, had swung round and was talking with eager animation to Boris and Maddelena, the girl still holding her violin.

As Austin entered she laid down the instrument and ran towards him, giving him both her hands in greeting.

"You! Oh, I am glad! But why did you not come before, so that you could have heard Boris sing? The very first time for so very many weeks—and superbly!"

"I did hear quite a lot from outside—the violin too, Miss Maddelena," he said, smiling down at her. "You're right, superb is the only word."

He exchanged greetings with the *maestro* and Melikoff, who, flushed, smiling, excited, looked an altogether different being from the stricken, morose creature Austin had known hitherto.

"All is coming right, as I told you it would," said Cacciola delightedly. "The voice is fine as ever. You heard? It is but a matter of time now and our Boris will be known as the world's greatest tenor, and you, signor, will be able to boast that you are one of the few who has had the privilege of hearing him in private, for he will sing again presently. But come, you have not yet seen an old friend of yours, who happily is also here: my dear young pupil, Miss Winston."

Why he should have experienced an extraordinary sensation of embarrassment and dismay Austin really did not know, but he certainly did so, as from a big chair in the dusk beyond the grand piano Winnie rose and came towards him.

"Winnie! I didn't think to meet you here," he murmured confusedly.

"Nor I you," said Winnie. "I returned yesterday."

"I know. I was coming around to see you to-morrow. Did you have a good time, dear?"

"Quite good—thanks. But I must be off now. Good-bye, *maestro*, and——"

"But no, no, you must not go!" protested Cacciola.

"Giulia will bring in tea in one moment now—Maddelena will hasten her—real Russian tea that Boris has taught us to like, and it is so good for the voice too! Also you must sing again presently. We have not got that new song right yet."

"I'm so tired, *maestro*, and I couldn't sing after Mr. Melikoff. How splendid he is!"

"Pouff! Not sing again indeed; you must not talk like an amateur. You are an artiste, and among ourselves we never make comparisons. Though there can never be any comparison with Boris: he is unique! How thankful I am—and so is my Maddelena—that he is recovering himself. Now sit down again, my child, and here is a chair for Mr. Starr."

Maddelena had taken her uncle's hint and gone to hurry up Giulia with the tea, and Boris followed her. Austin heard her laugh as they went along the passage. Truly the atmosphere here had changed marvellously in these few days. He sat down in the chair Cacciola had pulled up close to Winnie's, but for once in his life could find nothing to say to her; while she virtually ignored him, and chatted with the *maestro* till the tea appeared, brought in procession by Giulia and the two young people.

Maddelena, in the highest spirits, was a charming hostess, and, like her uncle, treated Austin with the easy familiarity of old friendship. It was merely their unconventional, hospitable way, as Winnie at least knew perfectly well, from her long acquaintance with the *maestro*, though she had never happened to meet Maddelena till now; yet she wondered how often he had been there of late, and why he had said nothing about it.

There was more music after tea. Winnie sang without further demur, at the *maestro's* bidding, and was painfully conscious, as were her auditors, that, for her, she sang very badly. She had a beautiful mezzo-soprano voice, sweet, true and fresh as a song-bird's, and perfectly trained

—Cacciola had seen to that—but to-night it was toneless, lifeless, devoid of expression.

“I’m sorry, *maestro*,” she murmured apologetically at the end, meeting his gaze of consternation.

“We shall do better to-morrow,” he said consolingly. “Will you come to me at three? Good! It is strange, for it went so well before; but, as you say, you are tired, I should not have insisted. Now, Boris, once more?”

Melikoff, sprawling on the hearthrug and looking through a pile of music, selected a book of Russian songs, and began to rise.

“Not those!” said Maddelena imperatively, snatching the book from him and picking up another. “Mr. Starr wants to hear the Neapolitan ones—with the guitar. I will get it!” As she passed Austin she bent and whispered significantly, “He shall sing no Russian here if I can prevent it,” and he nodded as one who understood.

Winnie could not hear the words, but she saw the incident, and found in it fresh food for thought.

“With the guitar—good; that gives me a rest,” said Cacciola, quitting the piano and settling himself comfortably in his big chair. “They are trifles, these songs, but not unworthy even of Boris. There is the soul of the people in them. Now, my children.”

He was right. Those songs—sung by generations of humble folk for centuries, and famous throughout the world to-day—were a revelation as Boris Melikoff sang them, albeit he was the son of a sterner and sadder race: songs of life, and love, and death, of sunshine and storm, with the sound of the sea as an undertone through all, heard in the thrilling throb of the guitar, which Maddelena played like the artiste she was.

Austin listened in sheer delight, forgetful of everything else in the world for the moment.

When the last exquisite note died away there was a little interval of silence more eloquent than any words. Maddelena, the guitar on her lap, looked up at Boris with

a tremulous smile, her eyes shining through tears, murmuring something in Italian, and impulsively he stooped and kissed her on the lips, just as Cacciola cried, also in Italian :

“ *Brava ! brava !* dear children. There can be nothing better in its way ! ”

Austin joined wholeheartedly in the applause and congratulations.

“ How splendidly you accompany him, Miss Maddelena.”

“ Yes, does she not ? ” said Boris. “ I do not think I could sing those songs so with anyone but Maddelena. And you would not think it was so long since we practised them together—nearly a year ? ”

“ Yes, a long year ! ” said Maddelena.

“ I must be going,” Winnie announced. “ Good-bye, Miss Cacciola ; you’ve given me a most tremendous treat, both of you. Now keep up the singing, Mr. Melikoff. We’re all so proud of you, and want you to have the world at your feet, as you will soon ! Good-bye, *maestro*. Three o’clock to-morrow.”

She turned to Austin, with a curious enigmatic little smile, an inquiring lift of her eyebrows.

“ I’m coming with you,” he said, and proceeded to make his own adieux.

Cacciola came to the door with them, but scarcely had they descended the first flight of stairs when Maddelena came running after them.

“ Mr. Starr ! ”

Austin turned and came up a few steps to meet her.

“ I am so sorry,” she whispered hurriedly, bending her charming face confidentially towards him. “ I have not been able to question him about those others, or, more truthfully, I would not do so, for, as you see, he is beginning to forget, and I feared to bring the black shadow upon him again.”

“ I understand, Miss Cacciola, and I’ve got some information already, from another source ; but what about that key, and——”

"And the person who entered? We do not know. My uncle spoke to Boris next morning. He knew nothing, and says he is sure it was none of his friends. But that key which—*she*—had has never been found, and we have had the lock changed, as you said. Good-bye. Come again soon."

She retreated, and he ran down the stairs, overtaking Winnie just outside.

"Great luck to find you, dear," he said, falling into step beside her.

"Yes? I didn't know you were so intimate with the Cacciolas."

"I'm not, except that they're so friendly and easy to get on with. I've only met Miss Maddelena once before—when I went around there one evening."

"Oh, how interesting!"

She spoke quite gently, but in a tone and manner so cold and dignified that he might have been an utter stranger. He felt hurt, indignant; but his tone was as aloof as her own as he responded:

"Yes, it was interesting—very. I went, as I told you I should, to try and get hold of a clue."

She turned to him quickly:

"Oh! Did you find out anything?"

"Very little so far. I'll tell you all about it when we get in. I should have told you before, of course, if you hadn't been away."

"There's a tram stopping," she said inconsequently, and made for it. "Which way are you going?"

"To take you home, of course."

"I'm not going home, but to Grace at Buckingham Gate. She's there now."

He nodded; it was impossible to talk in the noisy and crowded tram.

"We'll take a taxi from here," he suggested meekly when they alighted at the terminus opposite the station.

"Certainly not! I'm going to St. James's Park," said

Winnie decisively, and hurried recklessly across the road, in imminent danger of being run over.

"Now what in thunder's wrong?" Austin asked himself, but there was no opportunity of asking her, until at length they reached the quietude of Buckingham Gate, and then he found it difficult to begin.

"I've such lots to tell you, but it will have to keep till to-morrow night, for I've to go around to the 'Courier' now," he said awkwardly. "Give my love to Grace. And—see here, Winnie—what's wrong, dear?"

"Wrong? What do you mean? Nothing—or—oh, everything, I think! Never mind. Here we are. Good night, Austin."

She did give him her hand, but withdrew it quickly, and stepped into the waiting lift, which bore her swiftly out of sight.

Austin stood for a few seconds, frowning; then lighted a cigarette, striking the match with an angry jerk, and went on his way feeling exceedingly ill-used!

CHAPTER XIX

DARK HOURS

THERE are very few, if any, prisoners, be they innocent or guilty, who, accused of murder, or of any other crime considered too serious to admit of release on bail, do not endure agonies of mind during that terrible interval between their committal and trial.

Possibly the innocent suffer the most; for to all the restraints and humiliations of prison life—less severe, indeed, than those imposed on convicted criminals, but still irksome and wearing to a degree—are added a bitter sense of injustice and often almost intolerable anxiety on account of those, their nearest and dearest, who, innocent as themselves, are yet inevitably involved in the disaster, subjected to all the agonies of separation, of suspense, sometimes of piteous privation. Even the fortitude induced by the inner consciousness of innocence is seldom strong enough to overcome this mental and physical distress.

So Roger Carling suffered—all the more because he strove to show no sign, endeavoured always to appear cheerful and confident in his interviews with his solicitors and counsel, and above all with Grace, whose visits, albeit under the strict regulations as to time, and under more or less official surveillance, were the great events of this grim and dreary period.

Like the blessed sunshine she came into that bare, formal room, always beautifully dressed, with a smile on her dear lips, the lovelight in her eyes; and they would

sit hand in hand and chat almost gaily for the prescribed time, which sped all too swiftly, while the dark intervals between dragged on leaden feet.

Only God, Who knows the secret of all hearts, knew what effort that courage required, or how nearly their hearts were breaking !

For the days and weeks were drifting by, and no fresh light whatever had been shed on the mystery of Paula Rawson's death. The trial was to take place early in the New Year, the first on the list for the session, and Cummings-Browne, K.C., had been secured for the defence. If anyone could secure acquittal on such slight grounds of defence as were at present available it was he. But although the faithful few never wavered in their belief of Roger Carling's innocence, they knew it would be a stern fight—in fact, almost a forlorn hope.

Only Grace herself would never acknowledge that. How his deliverance would be brought about, his innocence established before all the world, she did not know ; but not even in those long nights when she lay awake, thinking of and praying for her beloved in anguish of soul, did she allow herself to doubt that he would be delivered, he would be vindicated.

That sublime faith alone enabled her to endure these dark winter days of loneliness and sorrow.

Always she kept before her the one thought : " When Roger comes home." On that she shaped her whole life.

That was why she insisted on living alone in the little flat that was to have been their first home, which she told herself should yet be their home together.

Day after day she laboured, putting it in beautiful order, arranging Roger's writing-table, the chair that was to be his special one, his favourite books, just where she felt sure he would like them to be ; and while she was so employed she was almost happy.

It seemed as though any moment he might come in.

Only when each day's task was over, and she strove to concentrate her mind on reading or sewing, the thought of him in his bare prison room was almost more than she could endure, and slow, quiet tears would fall on the work or the page, while in her ears and in her aching heart echoed that haunting strain, last heard in Canterbury Cathedral on that never-to-be-forgotten Sunday after their marriage :

Hear my prayer, O Lord, incline thine ear :
Consider, O consider the voice of my complaint.

It seemed now to have been prophetic !

She never spoke to Roger of these her dark hours, nor he to her of his own ; but they both knew. There was no need of words.

Rather, in those precious minutes when they were together, they recalled that brief interlude at St. Margaret's, those " immortal hours " when little Miss Culpepper had hovered around them like a quaint, tutelary goddess.

" I've had another letter from Miss Culpepper," Grace told him one day. " Full of flourishes as usual, dear old thing. She's so upset at the idea that I haven't even one maid that if I said half a word I believe she would come up herself and take charge of me ! "

" I wish you would say the half word, darling," Roger urged, not for the first time.

" I know ; but I really can't. Think of her here in London ; it would be like pulling up a little old silver birch from a forest glade and sticking it in Shaftesbury Avenue ! "

" I hate to think of your being alone," he said wistfully.

" You mustn't think of it ! I'm a great deal better by myself than I should be with anyone else in the world

just now. And I have lots of visitors: daddy pretty often, of course, and Winnie when she is at home, though she's been away so much lately—more engagements than ever this winter, and most of them in the country, worse luck!"

"So Austin's left at a loose end, eh?"

"I suppose so. I haven't seen him for some days. Winnie will be back for Christmas."

"You're going to her then?" he asked quickly.

"I'm going about with her. As usual, we shall have quite a big day—a midday dinner in Bermondsey, high tea and a Christmas tree at Battersea, and a beano for the *padre's* poorest, and possibly blackest, sheep in the evening. Winnie will be a bright particular star, of course—they'd keep her singing for hours if they could! While I shall be just an all-round helper, in my old canteen get-up."

"Good! I shall be thinking of you all the time. But don't wear yourself out, darling," he said tenderly.

It was no new thing for her to devote herself through most of the season of conventional "festivity" to the poorest of her fellow-creatures, bringing a few hours of mirth and warmth and good fare to the starving and the squalid, giving to many of them fresh hope and strength that perhaps might help them to struggle out of the abyss of misery and destitution into which they had fallen.

Last year he had been with her, and a wonderful experience it was—an utter revelation to him of the grim underworld of humanity here in the greatest city of the world, the very heart of "Christian" civilization! Very many of the guests they had then helped to entertain had passed most of their lives in prison: now the prison walls had closed around himself. He indeed was innocent; he had not sunk into the grim underworld—had not as yet endured the lot of a common convict; but already he could sympathize, as never before, with the prisoners and

captives, with all who suffered, whether for their own sins or for the sins of others.

"Oh, I shan't wear myself out," Grace assured him. "I shall be happier on duty. Mother is going down to Hove, as usual, and insists on father going too. He doesn't want to, but it's less trouble to give way than to argue the point; and the change may do him good. He's not very fit, poor daddy!"

In fact the poor professor was having a very trying time at home, for Mrs. Armitage furiously resented the fact that he had contributed the utmost amount he could raise to the fund for Roger's defence, and on the rare occasions when she saw her daughter made Grace writhe under the sense of obligation, that was far more distressing than any consideration of her mother's utter lack of sympathy; she had been accustomed to that from her early childhood, and it had long ceased to hurt her.

It did seem hard that she should feel more humiliation in accepting this loan from her own people than in accepting those from friends—Austin Starr and the Winstons, and the dear jolly *padre*, Mr. Iverson, who had all been as good as their word. But she never let Roger have a hint of this; kept from him, so far as she could, everything disquieting, even the fact that there was still a lot of money needed, and had begged Mr. Spedding, the lawyer, not to reveal this to him.

"We shall have quite sufficient in good time, by the New Year," she assured Spedding, on such occasions as the point was raised in the course of their many conferences.

She had already made arrangements to raise the utmost possible on their wedding presents, and everything else of value that they possessed; also, if necessary, to sell up the furniture they had bought so gaily and lovingly in the months before their marriage, and so break up the home which, to "get ready for Roger" had been her

great solace in this awful interval; and where she was now living frugally as any nun, denying herself everything beyond the barest necessities of life, in order that she might save.

And with all this there would not be enough. Where the balance was to come from she did not know, racked her poor brains to discover, sought to buoy her mind with the faith that her prayers would be answered, that help and guidance would come in time.

She brooded anxiously over it again to-day as she made her way back to Westminster. As usual, after parting with Roger reaction followed the joy of the meeting, and a sense of utter desolation was upon her. If Winnie had been at home she would have gone along to Chelsea before returning to the loneliness of the little flat at the very top of a big block. As it was, she lingered aimlessly outside the station, staring with sad, unseeing eyes into the nearest shop window, then made her way through to St. James's Park, and sat down on the seat inside the gates by the bridge.

It was a chilly, wistful winter afternoon, the westering sun showing like a dim red ball through the haze. Very few people were about; near at hand there were but two strolling towards her—a young couple in earnest conversation.

She looked at them dully, then with quickened interest, as she recognized the man as Austin Starr, bending from his great height to listen attentively to his companion—a very attractive-looking girl, even in the distance, who was talking with animation. Any casual observer would have imagined them a pair of young lovers, and Grace felt an instant and curious sense of dismay.

It flashed to her mind that she had not seen Austin once at the Winstons' flat during the few days' interval when Winnie had been at home, though for months before their engagement, which had come about so

suddenly in the midst of her own trouble, there was seldom a day that he did not turn up early or late, for a few minutes at least. Also that Winnie had been strangely reticent about him, though, absorbed in her own anxieties, she had not given a second thought to that.

As they drew near she half rose from her seat, but resumed it. They passed, evidently too intent on each other to spare a glance for anyone else, and as they did so she heard the girl say, in a rich, vibrant voice, peculiarly distinct in the quietude:

"It may be as you say, but what does Sir Robert want with him?"

Sir Robert! Of whom were they speaking? Could it be Sir Robert Rawson?

She could not hear Austin's reply, and though she started up impulsively she did not follow them—merely watched them cross the bridge and disappear from view.

She guessed that the girl was Cacciola's niece, whom Austin certainly had mentioned when he told her of his visit, and of the disappointing result of his inquiries up to the present, but only in a casual manner. He must have developed the acquaintance swiftly in these few weeks!

She walked slowly back, turning the matter over in her mind perplexedly.

"There's a lady waiting to see you, ma'am," said the lift-man, a cheery, grizzled old veteran, and one of her staunch admirers.

"Waiting—where?"

"Why on the landing outside your door, ma'am. Sitting on a box she came with. I wanted her to come down to my missus, knowing you were out, but she wouldn't."

He swung open the lift-gates and Grace stepped out.

There, outside her door, as he had said, sitting on a small tin box, with an open basket beside her and something that looked like a little black fur muff cuddled in her arms—cold, tired, travel-stained but quite cheerful—was little Miss Culpepper!

CHAPTER XX

AN OLD ROMANCE

“**O**H, my dear Mrs. Carling, don't be vexed with me !” cried Miss Culpepper, rising and fluttering towards Grace. “ I've been fretting so about you being here all alone, and now I've had the good fortune to let the cottage for three months, and all the money paid in advance, I felt I must come straight up, without asking your permission. And—and I've brought Dear Brutus too. He's been so good through the journey.”

“ You darling !” cried Grace, and just hugged her, kitten and all. “ Come in. How cold and tired you must be ! And, oh, how glad I am to see you !”

Indeed, there was no one in the world, save Roger himself, whom she would have welcomed more gladly at this moment than the quaint little woman. It was extraordinary how her very presence dispelled that tragic, unutterable loneliness which had always hitherto assailed her when she returned to this her solitary nest, so lovingly prepared for the mate who might never come home to it.

As she flitted about, preparing tea for her unexpected guest, despite Miss Culpepper's protests that she “ hadn't come to be waited on,” caressing Dear Brutus and laughing at his antics, listening to the old lady's vivacious account of her journey, of the new tenants, and of the arrangements made for Cleopatra, whom Miss Culpepper had left as a “ paying guest ” with her friend at St. Margaret's, she felt more cheerful than she had done since the day when the black shadow fell on her and Roger, eclipsing their honeymoon, severing them perhaps for ever.

If Miss Culpepper had had her own way she would immediately have taken possession of the diminutive kitchen, and remained there, but that Grace would not hear of for a moment.

"Indeed, I want you to treat me just as an ordinary servant, except that I don't want any pay or to be a burden on you in any way," the old lady declared. "You see, I was in service all my life, with very good families, too, till I saved enough money to buy the cottage and set up for myself. So I do know my place, dear Mrs. Carling, and I shouldn't have assumed to come to you, uninvited, under any other circumstances."

"You're going to stay as my dear and honoured and most welcome guest," Grace assured her. "And I promise you that in every other respect you shall have all your own way, and cherish me as much as ever you like, when you are rested."

Miss Culpepper's anxious, loving old eyes had already noted the changes which these weeks of sorrow and anxiety had wrought in the girl since those few days of radiant happiness at the cottage. She looked, indeed, more beautiful than ever, but with a pathetic, etherealized beauty, fragile to a degree.

"It's high time somebody came to take care of her; she's on the very verge of a breakdown," Miss Culpepper inwardly decided, and unobtrusively entered on her self-imposed labour of love. Within twenty-four hours she and Dear Brutus were as much at home in the little flat as if they had lived there all their lives—and the cheerful confidence with which she regarded the future, as it concerned Roger and Grace, was an unspeakable comfort to her young hostess, while her amazing phraseology was entertaining as ever, and provided Grace with a new occupation—that of committing to memory the quaintest of the old lady's expressions in order to retail them to Roger when next she visited him.

"Never fear that everything will be made clear in the

long run, and your dear husband triumphantly vitiated," she declared. "It's terribly hard for you both now, but keep your courage up, *mettez votre suspirance in Dieu*: that means 'put your hope in God,' as I dare say you know. You'll wonder where I picked up such a lot of French," she continued complacently. "It was when I was a girl living in Paris with one of my ladies, and I've never forgotten it in all these years."

She sighed, and lapsed into silence, gazing meditatively into the fire. Grace, lying on the sofa, with Dear Brutus curled up in her arms, watched the wistful, gentle old face, and wondered what the little woman was pondering over.

"How long were you in Paris?" she asked presently.

Miss Culpepper started, and resumed her knitting with a slightly flurried action.

"I'm afraid I was *relevée* in the past," she confessed. "I was only there for about two years—the very happiest in all my life: at least the last year was. Then my lady's husband died suddenly—he was Sir Henry Robinson, who had a post at the Embassy, a very nice gentleman though a little pomptious sometimes—and the establishment had to be broken up. I came back to England, and soon got another place, a very good one—again with a lady of title, where I stayed for many years. And—and that's all!"

Again she was silent, apparently absorbed in her knitting, but Grace saw two tears roll down her withered cheeks, and wondered more than ever what train of remembrance had roused the old lady's emotion, though she did not like to question her further.

They both started as the front door bell sounded.

"I'll go," said Grace, rising, "I expect it is my father."

It was not the professor, but a small, spare, very neatly dressed old man, whom at first she did not recognize.

"Mrs. Carling?" he asked. "I must introduce myself, madam. My name is Thomson."

She knew him then, though she had only seen him

once previously, when he had given evidence at the police court on the return of the stolen papers to his master, Sir Robert Rawson.

"Mr. Thomson!" she exclaimed. "You—you have come from Sir Robert Rawson?"

"Not precisely, madam; though I am in Sir Robert's service. I came on my own account to beg the favour of a few minutes' conversation."

"Certainly. Do come in," she said, her pulses fluttered with the wild hope that this old servant, whom Roger so liked and trusted, might have something of importance to communicate.

As he followed her through the little hall he glanced with an expression of surprise at a hat and coat hanging there, which he recognized as Roger's; at several walking-sticks in a rack, at a sling of golf clubs in the corner, and, as he entered the dining-room, looked across at once at the writing-table by the window, and the little table with pipe-rack, tobacco jar, and match stand beside it.

"Excuse me, madam," he said quickly, "but is Mr. Carling at home—has he been released?"

Grace turned in surprise.

"No. What makes you ask that, Mr. Thomson?"

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, madam; but I saw Mr. Carling's things in the hall and his table there, just as he liked to have it when he was with Sir Robert, and I thought—I hoped——"

"They are ready for his home-coming," said Grace. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Thomson? This is my friend, Miss Culpepper. Why, do you know each other?"

For Miss Culpepper, who had risen hastily at their entrance, was staring at Thomson in a most curious and agitated manner. "It can't be—yes, it is!" she gasped. "James—James Thomson—don't you know me?"

He looked at her inquiringly and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, madam, you have the advantage of me. What name did you say?"

"Maria Culpepper, that was maid to Lady Robinson when you were Sir Henry's valet. I was thinking of you, and of those old days not five minutes ago. You've forgotten me years ago, I can see that, but I've never forgotten you, James, though you never wrote as you said you would!"

He put up his gloved hand and rubbed his chin meditatively, then removed the glove and extended the hand with conventional politeness.

"To be sure, Miss Maria. I remember you now, though it's a good many years ago. I've been with Sir Robert near forty years. Strange to meet you again like this—very strange; and with Mrs. Carling's permission I might call some night and have a chat over old times, but I'm a bit pressed for time just now, and have something urgent and private to say to Mrs. Carling."

"Yes, yes, of course, I'll go at once," murmured poor little Miss Culpepper, hastily gathering up her knitting which had fallen to the floor, and making a courageous attempt to recover her wonted dignity. "Good night, James. I—I shall be very glad to see you again, as you say, one of these days."

Grace accompanied her to the door, dismissed her with a kiss, and whispered a word of sympathy, then returned to Thomson, feeling more bewildered than ever.

"How very extraordinary that you and Miss Culpepper should be old friends," she said, motioning him to a chair.

"Thank you, madam. Quite so," he responded, seating himself bolt upright on the extreme edge of the chair, and holding his bowler hat on his knees. "I am sorry I did not remember the old lady at first. She was quite young then, as I was—a very nice young woman, now I come to think of it. Indeed, if I remember rightly, I had the intention at one time of asking her to be Mrs. Thomson, but fate intervened and we drifted apart."

His manner, formal, precise, irreproachably respectful,

yet seemed somehow curiously callous, and exasperated Grace, on behalf of her poor little friend.

"Evidently she has never forgotten you, Mr. Thomson," she said, with some warmth. "And she is the kindest and most loyal little creature in the world. She would have made a good and most loving wife."

"Quite so, madam. But even at the time I doubted if I was cut out for matrimony, and I have never seriously contemplated it since."

"Why did you come to see me?" she asked point blank, as he paused, and sat gazing, not at her, but at the crown of his hat.

"It's a little difficult to explain, madam," he said, raising his eyes for a moment, but without meeting her direct gaze. "And first I beg of you not to consider it an impertinence. Then—may I ask if Mr. Carling has ever spoken of me to you?"

"Often—and always in the very highest terms."

"That was like him," said Thomson, with more feeling in his dry voice than he had yet exhibited. "Except my master, Sir Robert, there's no gentleman in the world I respect so much, or who I'd sooner serve than Mr. Carling. He was always the same, always treated me like a human being and not a servant, or a stock or stone. Madam, I'd do anything in the world that I could to serve him!"

"I believe you, Mr. Thomson. Thank you," said Grace softly, telling herself that she had misjudged the man.

"This terrible charge that has been brought against Mr. Carling has upset me more than anything has done for years, madam," he resumed: "that and the fact that my master believes him to be guilty and has turned against him altogether. I can't understand it. Sir Robert ought to have known him better. I have presumed several times to try to remonstrate with my master, but he won't hear a word even from me. It's—well, really, madam, it's been a great grief to me, for it's the

only serious difference Sir Robert and I have ever had in all the years that I have served him."

"It's a great comfort to me—and it will be to my husband—to know that you are so loyal to him, Mr. Thomson," Grace said earnestly, greatly touched, but wondering more and more what had prompted the old man to come to her now.

"Thank you, madam. Though that is not actually what I took the liberty of coming here to say," he responded, as if in some uncanny manner he had read her unuttered thought. "It was to ask if you have arranged for Mr. Carling's defence?"

A wild hope flashed to her mind.

"Mr. Thomson! Is it possible that you know of anything—that you have any information that would help to clear him?"

He shook his head.

"Unfortunately, I know nothing whatever of Mr. Carling's movements on that fatal day, madam, beyond what I have heard and read as stated in evidence. That was not what I meant. He must have the best defence that money can obtain."

"Yes. And I hope—I think—we have arranged that Mr. Cummings-Browne, the famous K.C., will undertake the defence."

"Very good, madam. But I understand that these big legal gentlemen come very costly; and—I'm sure you will pardon me, and take the question as it is meant, as confidential and most respectful I do assure you, but—have you got the money in hand?"

"The greater part of it; and I shall get the rest by the time it is needed."

"Might I make bold to ask how much is still wanted?"

"About five hundred pounds," she replied, watching him perplexedly, while he continued to gaze down at his hat.

There was a little pause. Then:

"That's what I was afraid of, madam, knowing that Mr. Carling couldn't be by any means wealthy," he said slowly, and putting his hat on the table, unbuttoned his overcoat and from an inner pocket fetched out a worn and bulky leather case. "That's just why I came here to-night, madam. I've thought about it constant for weeks past, but it was a bit difficult to know how to do it without giving offence—though, in a matter of life and death, which is what this is, a lady like you and a gentleman like Mr. Carling wouldn't take offence where none was meant. I've got here five hundred and fifty pounds in Bank of England notes; they're all my own, they're not a quarter of my savings—for I've had good wages these many years and never any expenses to speak of, and I've invested well and regular. And now I beg you and Mr. Carling to do me the honour of accepting this as a loan—and as much again and more if it should be wanted—to be repaid any time, it doesn't matter how many years hence."

As he spoke he opened the case, extracted a sheaf of crisp white bank-notes, opened, smoothed them, laid them on the table, and rose, adding, "I think you'll find there are twenty-eight—twenty-seven twenties and one ten."

Grace had listened, too utterly amazed for speech; and now she, too, rose, in tearful, trembling agitation.

"Oh! Mr. Thomson, what can I say? It is too noble, too generous! But—I—we—can't really——" she cried incoherently.

"Please, madam, please!" he said, more hurriedly than he had yet spoken, and edging his way towards the door. "I'm not going to take them up nor touch them any more. The—the honour and the privilege is mine, and I'd take it kindly if you wouldn't mention the matter to Mr. Carling or to anyone; it's just between you and me, if you don't mind, madam. My respectful duty to Mr. Carling when you're able to see him, madam."

He was now in full retreat across the little hall, his hand actually on the latch of the door.

"Wait one minute," she pleaded distractedly. "At least let me try to thank you—try to say what I feel and think; or do come back to see your old friend, Miss Culpepper——"

But he had the door open and was already outside.

"Thank you kindly, madam. I would be very glad to call one evening and have a chat with Maria over old times. And please don't be so distressed, madam."

With that he was gone, passing like a grey shadow down the staircase, leaving Grace staring after him through her tears.

"And he didn't even let me shake hands with him!" she thought, as she went in and shut the door.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CHINESE ROOM

WHEN he reached the street Thomson discovered that he had left his right-hand glove in Mrs. Carling's flat. Not worth returning for it, he decided, thrusting his hand into his overcoat pocket. He would go round as he had suggested some evening and renew his acquaintance with Maria Culpepper—little Maria, whose very existence he had forgotten for so many years. The glove would provide an excuse.

Strange, indeed, to meet her again in their old age, like a ghost of the past. As he walked slowly along Buckingham Gate he deliberately and more or less successfully tried to recall recollections of those youthful days in Paris, and found it quite an interesting experiment—as interesting as turning out some old cupboard full of forgotten relics and rubbish.

“Yes, she was a pretty little creature,” he concluded. “Cheerful as a bird, and a nice hand at cribbage she could play too—very nice. P'r'aps she can still. I wonder where we'd have been now if we hadn't drifted apart? It was her fault though; for, now I come to think of it, I'm pretty sure I did write, and she never answered. Well, well.”

Still musing, he made his way back to Grosvenor Gardens. It was nominally his “evening out,” an institution Sir Robert had recently insisted on reviving. Thomson himself wanted no evening out—wanted nothing but to continue to tend the stricken master whom he served with

such silent, dogged, and dog-like devotion. It was still early, only just after eight o'clock, and he meant to spend the remainder of this his leisure evening in his own room, within call if he should be needed.

As he neared the great house, so silent and dark in these days, with the shadow of tragedy still heavy upon it, he saw a motor-car before the door, and quickened his pace, fearing that Sir Robert might have had a relapse and that this was the doctor's car. He was reassured as he recognized the car as Lord Warrington's Rolls-Royce, but at the same instant experienced a minor shock; for a tall, slender man, wearing a furred overcoat, approaching from the opposite direction, paused, looked up at the house, and then knocked and rang. That man was Boris Melikoff.

Earl Warrington and Melikoff both visiting Sir Robert together! What was in the wind now, he asked himself perplexedly, as, unobserved, he went down the area steps and let himself in at the basement door. Much-privileged servant that he was, he had for years possessed his own latchkey, and came and went as he chose, accountable to none but his master.

By the back staircase he made his way to the first floor and entered his own room—a fair sized, comfortable apartment at the end of the suite occupied by his master, and with a door that led direct into Sir Robert's bedroom.

Before the fire, in the one easy chair, reading an evening paper, was a nice-looking fresh-complexioned young man, Perkins, the male nurse, who, with Thomson himself, took charge of the invalid.

"I didn't expect you back so soon, Mr. Thomson," he said, rising deferentially. "Sir Robert's had his dinner all right, and there's a gentleman with him now."

"Yes—Lord Warrington," said Thomson, removing his overcoat and hanging it in a cupboard.

"Really, sir? I didn't know, of course. I gather that he came unexpected. But Sir Robert's expecting another gentleman directly. I was going to have my supper sent up here as you were out, but now——"

"That's all right, Perkins, you go and have it downstairs, it's livelier for you," said Thomson, kindly enough. "And don't hurry yourself. I shall be at hand now if anything's wanted. Tell them to send mine up as usual about half-past nine."

Seating himself, he picked up the paper, and Perkins promptly retreated. The servants' quarters were indeed by far the most cheerful in that grim house!

Thomson waited for two or three minutes, then rose, and with his usual noiseless tread passed through into Sir Robert's bedroom, illuminated only by a cheerful fire, and stood, listening intently.

No sound could be heard from the further room—the "Chinese Drawing-room," which did not communicate directly with this—where Sir Robert and his visitor were; and Thomson moved to the door, opened it very slightly and stood, again listening.

Soon he heard far off the tinkle of an electric bell, and rightly guessed it a summons to Jenkins, the butler, whose soft footsteps and pursy breathing thereupon sounded ascending the staircase. Then a murmur of voices from the Chinese Room: Lord Warrington's cheery tones, "Well, good-bye, old man! I'm glad indeed to see you so well on the way to recovery. I'll look in again soon if I may"; and retreating footsteps on the thick carpet.

Swiftly, Thomson emerged from his retreat, crossed the spacious landing, and entered a door to the left, closing

it silently behind him. This room was in darkness, except for the faint greenish, ghostly light from a street lamp that penetrated the jade-green silk curtains, and the air was oppressive with the fragrance of flowers, roses, violets, narcissi.

It was Lady Rawson's boudoir, kept, by Sir Robert's orders, exactly as it had been in her lifetime, the flowers frequently renewed, books and magazines placed there daily, as if ready for their mistress. A strange, uncanny atmosphere pervaded the luxurious room. The servants dreaded it, the housemaids whose duty it was to tend it worked in pairs, and scurried away the moment their task was finished. The only exception was Thomson himself, who usually arranged the flowers and periodicals before wheeling his master in for his daily visit, remaining beside him in imperturbable, unobtrusive attendance.

Unerringly, stepping as lightly as a cat on the soft carpet, he made his way across to the opposite wall, where a dark patch showed against the whiteness, *portières* of jade-green velvet that masked folding doors leading into the Chinese Room. On the other side the doorway was concealed by magnificent curtains of black and gold embroidery in a dragon design, that had a very curious feature—one that Thomson had discovered by pure accident. The eyes of the dragons were pierced with large eyelet holes, invisible from even a short distance, but through which a perfect bird's-eye view could be obtained of the room beyond.

The doors were closed but not latched, and it was the work of an instant cautiously to swing them open sufficiently to clear the two nearest peep-holes, just at a convenient level to Thomson's eyes.

Sir Robert was lying on his wheeled couch before the fire, with his back towards the screened portal and the hidden watcher, who, however, could see his master's face reflected in a great lacquered mirror on the

opposite wall. A remarkable face, aged, drawn, but also refined by these long weeks of suffering and sorrow. Under the short, carefully trimmed white beard which had been allowed to grow during his illness his square jaw was firm and relentless, as his steel-grey eyes were keen as ever beneath their grey penthouse brows.

He turned his head slightly as the door opened and Jenkins announced

"Mr. Boris Melikoff."

"It is very good of you to come, Mr. Melikoff," Sir Robert said, with grave courtesy, extending his hand, over which the young man bowed respectfully. "I cannot rise to receive you. I am quite helpless as you see. Will you sit in that chair?"

Boris complied. The chair, as Thomson had already noted, was placed so that the lamplight would fall full on the face of the visitor, leaving that of his host in shadow, an invariable device of the old diplomatist at important interviews.

For a few seconds the old man and the young one looked at each other warily, like a couple of fencers preparing for a bout, then Rawson's stern gaze softened.

"You are very like my dear wife," he said quietly, "so like her that you might almost have been brother and sister rather than cousins."

The Russian's handsome, sensitive face relaxed responsively.

"Many people have said so, sir, who knew us both," he replied.

"You wonder why I sent for you?"

"Yes, sir—naturally."

"Naturally. And yet I myself scarcely know why I did so, except——"

He paused, and Boris waited. Not for long.

"Why didn't you two trust me?"

Sir Robert's deep voice quivered with poignant emotion, and, though he controlled his features, his eyes betrayed an agony of regret and reproach.

"I—I don't know, sir," stammered Boris. "I think—we—believed—feared that you were the enemy of our unhappy country; that—in your position——"

"I the enemy of Russia—of the real Russia? Paula could never have thought that."

"She did indeed, sir," said Boris earnestly. "Or perhaps it would be more truthful to say that she believed you set your duty to your Government above all personal sympathy."

"She was right there," Sir Robert rejoined sternly. "To a man in the position I once held duty must always come first, if he is to be worthy of that position. But if she had trusted me—as I never doubted she did till it was too late—if she had told me what was in her heart, in her mind, and that she was meeting—wishing to aid—her compatriots, her kinsfolk, how gladly, how greatly I could have helped her and them! But she told me nothing—not even of your existence. Yet surely she did not, she could not, have feared me?"

"Not personally, sir," Boris answered slowly. "Paula was absolutely fearless; also she honoured and—yes, and loved you, though more as a daughter than——"

"Than as a wife. I know that. You are very honest, Mr. Melikoff! Well?"

"But I think—or rather I know—that she wanted to—to play her own hand herself in a way. To take all risks, and not to involve you——"

"Not involve me! Do you realize that by her action—her fatal action in taking those papers—she might have involved the whole of Europe in catastrophe?"

"I knew nothing of that, sir," said Boris dejectedly.

"Quite so. I have satisfied myself on that point, through sources quite unknown to you; otherwise you

would not be here now but in all probability would have been deported weeks ago, to meet whatever fate might be in store for you in your own country," said Sir Robert grimly. "However, let that pass. Tell me this, Mr. Melikoff—I have a right to know: you loved each other, you two foolish and headstrong children?"

Boris met his searching gaze sadly but steadily.

"I loved *her*, Sir Robert; and I have loved her ever since we were little children together. But she never loved me. I do not think Paula ever loved any man—not in the sense most of us mean by the word."

"Again I believe you, and not without evidence." He drew towards him a carved sandalwood casket that stood on a small table beside him, opened it, and took out a thin packet of letters which Boris recognized as his own. "I have here a number of your letters to her. I have read them all. They are not 'love letters,' but I know from them that you loved her, without hope and without reward. Would you like to have them again? In some ways they are dangerous documents to be in any custody but your own."

He passed the packet to Boris, who took it with a trembling hand.

"Sir Robert, you are too good—too generous! What can I say?"

"Say nothing. And if you will take my advice put them in the fire. It is the safest place for them."

Simply as a child Boris obeyed on the instant, and in silence they watched the packet consumed to a little mass of black ashes.

"I have but one letter of hers, sir," said Boris presently. "The last she ever wrote me, and therefore most precious. It is very brief. Would you—care to read it?"

He unfolded the letter—it was but a half-sheet—with a lingering, reverent touch, and held it towards Sir Robert.

"No, no, keep it, lad. It is yours and sacred," the

old man said after a moment's hesitation. "As I have said, I believe you and trust you. That was the only one she wrote?"

"Oh, no, sir! There were several others. Mere formal notes like this, in Russian or sometimes in French. I ought to have destroyed them at once—she told me to; and they are lost, or they have been stolen from me."

"Stolen!"

"I fear so, sir, though when or how I cannot say. I was ill, very ill, for a time after Paula's—death. They were in an *escritoire* in my bedroom, and after I recovered I found they were gone."

"Do you suspect anyone?"

Boris shook his head.

"Impossible to suspect the good friend with whom I live, or any of my visitors. I have wondered sometimes whether, in my delirium, I might not myself have destroyed them, on some subconscious impulse, remembering that she had told me to burn them. They could not possibly be of any value, or of any danger, to anyone. Except to myself, they were quite meaningless, and with nothing but the handwriting itself to show by whom they were written."

"Strange," mused Sir Robert. "You are sure they were as harmless, as meaningless, as you say?"

"Quite sure. And may I say this, Sir Robert? I am certain that when Paula took those papers from your safe—as I fear there is no doubt she did—that it was the very first time she had done or attempted to do such a thing: that she yielded to a sudden and overwhelming temptation."

"I wish I could believe that," said Sir Robert with stern sadness.

"You may believe it, sir, for it is the truth. She would have told me of any such attempt, and I give you my word—believe it or not as you choose—that I should

have attempted to dissuade her. I am a fighter—or I was one, when I could fight and could see my enemy—but I am no intriguer, nor was she really. She bewildered me often by her romantic schemes—they were so wild, so vague—but I humoured her in them, because I loved her, because it brought her nearer to me. It—oh, how can I put it?—it was like child's play, though she herself was so much in earnest."

"Child's play!" echoed Sir Robert bitterly. "Child's play that cost her life, and that will cost the life of the one whom, next to her, I cared for most in this world! I tell you, Melikoff——"

He broke off, and Boris looked at him in surprise and apprehension. But Sir Robert was not looking at him; he was staring into the big, lacquered mirror, and his face had become absolutely expressionless.

"One moment," he said quietly, and touched a button of an electric bell-stand on the table beside him, without removing his gaze from the mirror.

"Can I do anything?" Boris began, and paused as Sir Robert lifted his hand warningly. He appeared to be listening intently.

In about a couple of minutes Thomson entered the room.

"Oh, it's you, Thomson," said Sir Robert quietly. "I thought you were out?"

"I returned some time ago, sir."

"Where is Perkins?"

"Downstairs at supper, Sir Robert."

"Oh! Will you put on the lights in Lady Rawson's boudoir? Go through this way, please," Sir Robert added as Thomson moved towards the door by which he had entered.

"Very good, sir," he answered, and imperturbably drew back the dragon curtains, pushed back the partly opened doors, switched on the lights in the inner room, and returned for further orders.

"I should like you to see that room, Mr. Melikoff," said Sir Robert. "It is my dear wife's boudoir. Will you come with me? Wheel me in, Thomson."

As Thomson obeyed, his master's keen glance swept over the beautiful room.

"The outer door is open. Close and lock it and give me the key," he commanded, and, when Thomson had complied, added, "thank you. That will do for the present. I will ring when I need you again."

Thomson retreated through the Chinese Room, went to the bedroom and mechanically tended the fire, then to his own room, where he sat down and waited.

It was half an hour or more before he was again summoned, and then he found Sir Robert alone. The dragon curtains were still pulled apart, but the folding doors of the boudoir were closed and locked.

Master and man looked steadily at each other for a good half-minute, then Sir Robert said:

"For how long have you been in the habit of spying on me, Thomson?"

"I have never done such a thing before, sir."

"Humph! I wonder if that is true? It is something at least that you do not attempt to deny that you were spying on me to-night. Why did you do it?"

"Need you ask that, Sir Robert? It was by chance that I discovered that Russian gentleman was coming to see you. I thought it a very dangerous thing for you to see him alone."

"When I pay you to 'think' I'll tell you so," Sir Robert replied icily. "I am still able to think for myself, Thomson."

A quiver of emotion passed over Thomson's usually passive face.

"I'm sorry, Sir Robert; it was an error of judgment on my part. It shall not occur again. I—I have served you faithfully these many years."

"I never said you hadn't. But remember in future, please, that excess of zeal is sometimes more dangerous than a deficiency of that otherwise excellent commodity. And now you had better call Perkins to help you put me to bed."

"Very good, sir," said Thomson.

CHAPTER XXII

A PEACEMAKER

ON Christmas morning Grace Carling knelt before the altar in Westminster Abbey, where, as usual at this early service, there were but a few worshippers.

Through the vast, dim spaces above, beyond the radiance of the lighted chancel, the soft coo of the pigeons outside was distinctly audible above the low tones of the ministrant priest. Of other sounds there were none; the very spirit of peace seemed to brood over the glorious old place, the spiritual heart of England to-day as through so many long, long centuries.

There was peace in Grace Carling's heart for the moment, renewed strength and courage for the long ordeal through which she and her beloved were painfully passing. She knew that at this hour, yonder in the prison chapel, such a little distance away in reality, Roger himself would likewise be kneeling; and, as always at these times, they were very near to each other, in that spiritual communion which, to those who have experienced it, is a sublime and eternal fact, albeit a fact that even they can neither explain nor understand.

When she went out presently with the words of the benediction still lingering in her ears, her pale face was serene and beautiful as that of an angel.

There were very few people about at this early hour—a mild, grey morning, with the great towers of Westminster looming through the haze like those of some dim, rich city of dreams. She walked swiftly, absorbed in thought,

and as she reached Buckingham Gate came face to face with Austin Starr.

"Why, what an early bird!" she said, smiling up at him.

"I've been around to your place with some flowers—spring flowers, that mean hope! I guessed you would be at church, and wanted you to find them to greet you," he explained.

"That was dear of you, Austin; just like you. Have you breakfasted? No? Then come back to breakfast with me, do. You haven't met my dear little Miss Culpepper yet."

"Thanks, I'd like to. Is that the old lady I saw right now? She looks a real peach."

"She's priceless, and such a comfort to me. What a long time since I've seen you, Austin. I began to think you were forgetting me."

"I couldn't do that," he assured her earnestly. "But I've been very busy and very worried. I'll tell you all about it directly, if I may."

He did look worried—she had noticed it at once—but there was no opportunity to say more at the moment, as they had reached the lift.

Miss Culpepper came running out at the sound of Grace's key in the lock.

"Oh, my dear, a gentleman has been with a mass of such beautiful flowers and a great basket of fruit!"

"I know. Here he is, come back to breakfast. Miss Culpepper—Mr. Austin Starr. Now go in to the fire, Austin, and make yourself at home—you'll find Dear Brutus on the hearthrug, I expect—while I take my hat off."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Culpepper," said Austin. "Mrs. Carling has just been telling me what a great comfort you are to her, and I can well believe it. We all hated her to be living here all alone. Why, did you expect me or is someone else coming?"

His quick eyes had noted that the table was laid for three persons, and already adorned with his own gifts.

Miss Culpepper paused in the act of laying another place, and put her finger to her lip mysteriously, with a significant glance towards the door.

"That's Mr. Carling's place," she whispered. "It's always laid ready for him at every meal. It pleases her, and I think it's a beautiful idea really."

Austin nodded sympathetically, but felt troubled nevertheless. The thought occurred to him that "if things went wrong with Roger"—the only way in which at present, even to himself, he would acknowledge the probability of Carling being convicted of the crime with which he was charged—Grace would surely die, or lose her reason.

He felt somewhat reassured, as to her mental state anyhow, when she re-entered, looking so cheerful, so self-possessed, yet, alas! physically so fragile.

She seemed perfectly normal, and yet he noticed how often she glanced at that vacant place, with the chair drawn up before it, with such a curious expression in her eyes, as if she indeed saw Roger sitting there in the flesh. It was absolutely uncanny.

"Now what's the trouble, Austin?" she asked, when the simple meal was at an end, and Miss Culpepper retreated with the breakfast things, leaving them together. She had drawn up a chair for him in front of the fire, and he knew that the vacant easy one was reserved for Roger, that "shadowy third."

"First it's about Roger. I've been following up every trail I could think of, Grace, and every one of them has led just nowhere. I seem to get up against a blank wall every time. I've even been to Snell again, but he can't or won't help; and sometimes I feel just about in despair!"

She met his troubled gaze serenely.

"I know you are leaving no stone unturned, Austin, and that the reason why you have not been to see me was

because you had discovered nothing at present. But don't let it trouble you. We must just go on keeping our hearts up, trusting and waiting. That's sometimes the hardest thing in life, but it's got to be done. And Roger will be cleared, how or when I do not know—yet: only that he will be saved, freed, his innocence established before the whole world!”

“You're wonderful, Grace! I wish to heaven I had such faith.”

“I couldn't live without it,” she said simply. “We all seem to be moving in a terrible fog, or, rather, to be so enveloped in it that we can't move, we don't know which way to turn! But the fog's going to lift, the sun's going to shine—in time! Have you seen much of the Cacciolas lately?”

“Not for the last few days. I've been in and out a good deal, have got to know them pretty well, and the more I know them the better I like them—even young Melikoff—and the more I'm convinced that none of them had any more to do with that unhappy woman's death than you or I had, and know no more about it. They seldom speak of it now—never when Boris is there. Lady Rawson seems to have had a sort of malign influence over him, which Maddelena resented bitterly; so did the *maestro*, for all he's so gentle and tolerant, dear old man!”

“Was that Miss Maddelena I saw you with last week?” asked Grace quietly.

“Saw me with her—where?”

“In St. James's Park. I was sitting down. You passed quite close to me.”

“Oh, yes! I did meet her one day, by pure chance. I never saw you. Curious too, she was very upset because Boris had had a letter from Sir Robert Rawson asking him to go and see him, and she didn't want him to do so.”

“Did he go?” asked Grace quickly.

“I don't know—I haven't seen or heard from any of them since. But if he did, and anything transpired that

would give us any light, Maddelena would have got it out of him and sent word to me—sure.”

“ I wonder why Sir Robert wanted to see him,” mused Grace, “ and why Miss Maddelena didn’t want him to go ? ”

He smiled.

“ She was afraid it would upset him. She’s very fond of Boris, that’s why she was so jealous of Lady Rawson’s influence over him. As a matter of fact, she’s made up her mind to marry him, and I guess she’ll have her way ! She’ll be a charming and a jolly good wife too, though it will be a case of ‘ one who loves and one who graciously permits himself to be loved.’ They’re going to the States in the spring ; Cacciola’s just fixed up a season in New York, where Boris will make his *début*, and then they’ll go on tour. I bet Maddelena comes back as Mrs. Melikoff. She’s just about the most masterful young woman I’ve ever met, though a real good sort too.”

He smiled again, indulgently and reminiscently, then sighed.

“ Cacciola wanted Winnie to go with them,” he continued slowly, staring fixedly at the fire ; “ but I gather she’s refused. It would have been a big chance for her ; and besides, I’ll have to go over myself in the early spring. We could all have gone together, and she’d have met my mother and sisters, and—— But now of course——”

He turned to Grace with startling suddenness. “ Grace, do you know that Winnie’s giving me the frozen mitten ? ”

“ Giving you the—what ? ” she echoed in sheer surprise.

“ That she’s turned me down. I haven’t even seen her since the day after she came back from Bristol.”

“ Nor have I, or only for a few minutes between whiles. She’s been away most of the time, with all these provincial engagements—only got back late last night ; she rang me up.”

“ Did she say anything about me ? ”

“ No, only that she hadn’t seen you. I’m going to help down at Bermondsey. Aren’t you coming too ? ”

"No—I don't know. She hasn't asked me. Fact is, she hasn't answered my letters—she's simply ignored me. I went around yesterday, and her maid said she wasn't at home, though I'm plumb certain she was all the time. Then I rang up, and again the maid answered and said Winnie had gone to bed, and again I didn't believe her. Why is she treating me like this? I can't understand it. It's worrying me no end. I'd have tried to find out from George, but he's in Paris, as you know."

Grace nodded.

"When did you see her last?"

"I told you—the day after she returned from Bristol. It was at Cacciola's, as it happened, and she came on here to you afterwards. I came with her as far as the lift, but she'd scarcely speak to me, though *why* I don't know to this moment."

He looked so utterly forlorn and lugubrious that Grace had to smile, while she rapidly reviewed the situation and recalled her own vague suspicions.

"You say you last saw her at Cacciola's," she mused. "What happened there?"

"Nothing that I know of," he asserted earnestly. "They were singing—or Boris was—when I got there, and I didn't see Winnie at first; she was sitting in a dark corner."

"H'm! And Miss Maddelena was there?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't she be?"

"Does Winnie know what you've just told me—about Mr. Melikoff and Maddelena?"

"I don't know—how should I? I've told you I haven't seen her since. What's that got to do with it, anyhow?"

"Quite a lot, perhaps. Look here, Austin, I'll be quite frank with you. When I saw you and Miss Maddelena—if it was she—last week, until I recognized you I really thought you were—well, just a pair of sweethearts. You really appeared to be on such very confidential terms!"

"Great Scott! Why I—she—it's only her way! She's impulsive, affectionate with people she likes, even when they're only casual acquaintances like myself. The old man's the same. See here, Grace, you don't mean that you think Winnie's jealous—jealous of Maddelena?"

She laughed outright. She couldn't help it. His consternation and his air of injured innocence were so comical.

"I think it highly probable, my dear Austin."

"But it's absurd!" he protested. "And it's not a bit like Winnie."

"Isn't it? I'm afraid you don't know much about women, Austin, even though you *are* a novelist, and psychologist, and all the rest of it."

He laughed too, then, somewhat ruefully:

"I guess you're about right. You generally are. Question is—what's to be done?"

"What did you send her for Christmas?"

"Only some flowers and candies. I took them around myself last night and left them. But I've got this." From his waistcoat pocket he extracted a dainty little morocco case, opened it and passed it to Grace, adding sheepishly, "You see, I wanted to give her this myself, if she'll only see me."

"Oh, how beautiful!" Grace cried, as she examined the ring—a superb sapphire surrounded by small diamonds.

"Sapphire's her favourite stone, and just the colour of her eyes, that wonderful deep blue," he said. "I bought it weeks back, and have been carrying it around ever since, waiting the opportunity to give it her."

"You are a dear, Austin, and you won't have to wait much longer. Take my advice and go straight along to Chelsea now; you'll catch her before she starts out for church, and you can go with her. I'm coming along later. She'll see you right enough this time."

He obeyed with alacrity, and when she had started him off she rang up Winnie. Martha answered, and asked her

to "hold the line" while she fetched her mistress. A minute later came Winnie's fresh young voice.

"That you, Grace, darling? How are you? You're coming along directly?"

"Yes, in an hour or so, I've just had an early visitor—Austin. The poor boy's awfully upset."

"Really? Why?" Winnie's tone had become frigid.

"I think you know well enough, old thing. He's confided to me that you seem to have given him the frozen mitten!"

A pause. Then, icily:

"I don't understand the expression; it sounds exceedingly vulgar!"

"Win, darling, don't fence, or pretend not to understand. It's serious. I saw something was wrong; I've suspected it for some time, and had no end of trouble to get it out of him. But he says you've cut him systematically ever since you got back from Bristol, that you won't see him or answer his letters, and he's frightfully unhappy about it."

"Is he?" Another pause, and what sounded like an angry sob. "It's all very well for him to talk, but if you'd seen him as I did, with that Maddelena Cacciola, when he didn't know I was there—why I thought he was going to kiss her in front of everybody! And—and—oh, I can't explain, but I—I saw and heard quite enough that day to—to realize that—I'd made a mistake—or he had."

"Winnie, you're quite wrong! I know all about that, and there's nothing in it. Surely you know the Cacciolas well enough by this time to know how unconventional and—well—effusive they are. Austin admires the girl in a way, but he says she's 'the most masterful young woman he's ever met,' and—he loves you, Win; you know that in your heart. It—it's not worthy of you, dear, to mistrust him so—not to give him a chance to explain. Darling, are you going to let the rift widen—perhaps to spoil both your lives for nothing—when there's so much real sorrow in the world?"

"I know. I've been pretty miserable too, and—I don't know when I shall see him again," said Winnie tremulously, and Grace smiled.

"You'll see him in about ten minutes, if he's been able to find a taxi. He's on his way to you now. Bye-bye till lunch time."

She put up the receiver,

CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT GIULIA SAW

MR. IVERSON'S Christmas party for his poorest, and some of his "blackest," sheep was in full swing when Grace arrived there that evening.

Outside the Parish Hall a taxicab was standing, unattended, and she wondered for whom it might be waiting. She entered and stood for a time, unobserved, among the throng inside the door, for the place was crowded.

On the tiny stage was Maddelena Cacciola, a bewitching figure in a gay *contadina* costume, singing a merry, rollicking song to her own guitar accompaniment.

A roar of applause followed, the rough audience stamping, shrilling, whistling their delight, till the girl reappeared, beaming at them, and waved her hands to enjoin silence.

"Just a little dance now, my friends, and that must be the very last, please," she announced; and forthwith Cacciola's master touch brought forth real music, even from the old tinpotty piano. And Maddelena danced.

Grace watched her, fascinated. How charming, how versatile, how utterly unaffected she was; and what a consummate artiste! No wonder Austin had been attracted by her. Who could resist her? She was glad she had persuaded Winnie and him not to come on here with her to-night, but to get into "glad rags" and go to dine and dance at the Savoy. Her peacemaking effort had been entirely successful, and all was well with those two whom she loved. Winnie, the sapphire and diamond ring gleaming on her hand, had been radiant all through that tiring afternoon, had sung delightfully, had been her most

lovable self ; but it was just as well that she should not enter into rivalry with this irresistible Italian girl !

The end of the dance evoked another tumult of appreciation, but Maddelena had vanished, not to return, and the vicar's jolly voice boomed out.

" We'd like to listen all night to the signorina, but we mustn't be greedy and work her too hard. Now I vote we have some more tea and cakes—they're all ready in the next room—and then we'll clear for a dance."

In the movement that followed he caught sight of Grace, and made his way towards her.

" My dear child, how long have you been here ? "

" Only a few minutes, just in time to help, *padre*."

" Nothing of the sort ; you look tired out. Come along ; we'll find a chair in a comparatively quiet corner."

" I'm not tired, really ; I'm happier at work."

" I know that," he said in his fatherly way. " But you mustn't overdo it, you know. Where's Miss Winston ? "

" I persuaded her not to come. She's been singing all the afternoon at one place and another ; we've had quite a big day of it, *padre*."

" Just so. And it's all right here, as it happens. We've got the Cacciolas, as you see, and they're a host in themselves—dear folk ! Isn't Miss Maddelena wonderful ? Why didn't you bring your little Miss Culpepper along ? "

" She's keeping house with Dear Brutus, and expected an old sweetheart to tea."

" You don't say so ! Well, well. Now sit you down, child, and I'll bring you some coffee."

" I've got some here ; and please, Mr. Iverson, do introduce me to Mrs. Carling."

It was Maddelena herself who joined them, a dark wrap thrown over her picturesque dress, a big, steaming cup of coffee in her hand.

He complied, and Maddelena smiled down at her, and tendered the coffee.

"It is for you; I saw how tired you were looking, and brought it on purpose. Now you must drink it," she said in her charming, authoritative way. "And, oh, I am so glad to meet you at last, Mrs. Carling! I think of you so often." She drew up another chair for herself, and the vicar slipped away to resume his duties as host. "You are so brave, so good—you set aside your so great sorrow and anxiety and think always of others; the *padre* has told me. It is wonderful," Maddelena continued. "And, oh, I do so wish I could help you! I have so wanted to come and see you, but I did not like to, as we had never met."

"Well, now we have met I hope you will come and see me some day soon, Miss Cacciola," said Grace. "I have heard of you too, from my old friend Austin Starr."

"Ah, yes—that nice Mr. Starr! He is seeking still for fresh evidence that might help your husband. Has he any success yet?" Grace shook her head sadly. "Alas! it is a terrible mystery. We sought to help him, my uncle and I, yes, and even Boris, as perhaps he told you, but we could discover nothing—nothing at all!"

"Yes, he did tell me, and indeed I am very grateful, Miss Cacciola. It *is* strange—terrible—that we can get no fresh light at all. But I am quite sure that the truth will be revealed. But for that faith I—I don't think I could bear the suspense."

"Do you know, at the first, Mrs. Carling, I thought—as Boris also and doubtless very many others did—that your husband must have been guilty, until I saw him in the police court that day, and then I knew—though how I knew I cannot tell you—that he was innocent; and I would do anything in the world that I could to help to prove it. But what can we do?"

Grace pressed her hand, keenly touched by the girl's earnest, impulsive sympathy, but could find no words to reply. What, indeed, could be said?

"I have wondered often of late," Maddelena resumed,

her dark brows contracted in thought, "whether our old Giulia would be able to tell you anything."

"Your Giulia? Why, who is she?" asked Grace.

"My uncle's housekeeper—in fact our only servant. She has been with him for many years and is devoted to us all. She is Italian, of course, a peasant, and quite uneducated, but she has—what do you call it?—clairvoyance, the 'second sight,' sometimes, and can see, oh, the most extraordinary things—for some people!"

"Really!" Grace exclaimed, almost in a whisper, her heart beginning to flutter, her eyes searching the girl's vivid, thoughtful face.

"Yes. She can see nothing for herself—it is often so—only for others, and she tells me things that do come true. Many times of late, as I begged her to, she has tried to see what happened that day, but she has failed so far. She says she knew, when Paula Rawson left, that there was tragedy round her; she saw her depart as in a red cloud, and was half minded to follow her at the time. If only she had done so! But she disliked and feared her always. And she has never been able to see anything clearly about it—for me. She says it is because Paula really does not come into my life at all, except indirectly. It might be different with Boris, though she has never tried to 'see' for him. He does not know of her powers, and I do not want him to let her try with him—it might upset, unbalance him again, restore the terrible influence Paula had over him. You understand that, don't you? Or you would if you knew him, and how terribly he has suffered! But I do believe she might be able to see something for you."

"I wonder," Grace murmured perplexedly. "I don't know anything about such things, Miss Cacciola; of course I have heard of clairvoyants."

"Yes, fortune tellers and charlatans most of them; but our Giulia is not like that. It is a real gift with her. Oh, if you would come to see her! Why not come now? She

is all alone, and it will be quite quiet. Or are you too tired ? ”

“ Tired ? Oh, no, indeed,” Grace declared eagerly. “ But I should be taking you away from here.”

“ I’m quite ready to go. They’ll have to do without me for the rest of the evening,” said Maddelena rising. “ We’ve a cab waiting outside, Mrs. Carling, so I will just find the chauffeur and tell my uncle we are going. Will you stay here till I return ? ”

She flitted away and disappeared among the noisy, merry crowd that was beginning to drift back from the refreshment-room, to return in a minute or two accompanied by the taxi-driver.

“ Here we are. I have told the *padre* that I am going to start you off home, as I will after you have seen Giulia. Come along.”

They drove along the Mall, almost deserted on this Christmas night, a peaceful and beautiful scene with the river at full tide under the moonlight. The last time Grace had driven along here was on her way from church on that wedding day that seemed a lifetime ago. Now she felt as if she were bound on some strange, vague adventure in the world of dreams !

The cab turned up a narrow street on the left, and paused at the high road, held up by a couple of passing trams—paused just outside that fatal post office. The house was dark, the shop windows plastered with big posters announcing that the premises had been sold by private treaty.

“ The horrible place is to be pulled down,” said Maddelena. “ That is well. Mrs. Cave has got another shop about a quarter of a mile away, nearer the station. She moved there, post office and all, a few days ago. She is very glad. No wonder.”

As they crossed the road and drove down the quiet square, Grace, staring out of the window, could almost imagine that she saw the ghost-like figure of Paula Rawson

gliding along in the shadow—gliding to her doom—and shivered involuntarily.

“You are cold!” exclaimed Maddelena solicitously.

“No. I was only—remembering,” she answered, and Maddelena pressed her arm with an impulsive gesture of sympathy.

“You can wait,” she told the chauffeur. “Go down and tell Mr. Withers you are to sit by his fire till I call you. Take my arm, Mrs. Carling. We will go slowly up these many stairs. They are trying to a stranger.”

Grace, indeed, was breathless when they reached the top, and Maddelena led her straight into the big drawing-room, where the cosy gas fire was aglow as usual—the Cacciolas loved warmth—switched on the lights, and pushed her guest into the easiest chair.

“Now you must have a glass of my uncle’s famous wine and a biscuit. Yes, yes, I insist, it is here—everybody has to do as I say; Mr. Starr calls me ‘she who must be obeyed.’ Has he told you that? He is very funny sometimes, that Mr. Starr, but he is right there. So, drink it up while I go and prepare Giulia.”

She found the old woman sitting in her old arm-chair in the spotless kitchen—placidly enjoying her Christmas evening playing “patience,” in company with a flask of Chianti and a dish of salted almonds—bestowed a hearty kiss upon her, and explained why she had returned so early.

“But who is it?” protested Giulia. “I do not know that I shall be able to see for her.”

“Thou wilt try, dear good Giulia,” coaxed Maddelena. “It will be kind indeed, for she is in deep distress over the fate of one whom she loves most dearly. Yes, she is a stranger. I will not even tell thee her name; it is not necessary: at least thou hast often said so. Let the light come if it will.”

“Well, well, thou wilt have thy way as usual, *carissima*,” said Giulia resignedly, pushing aside her cards. “But she must come to me here.”

"I will bring her on the instant," said Maddelena, and returned to Grace.

"She is ready. Do you mind coming into the kitchen? She is always at her best in her own domain. Do you understand Italian? No? Then I must be with you to translate, for when she 'sees' she always speaks in her own tongue. I will write it down—that will be best. Ah, you have drunk the wine—that is good. You look just a little bit less like a ghost now, dear lady. This way."

Giulia rose as they entered the kitchen, dropped a quaint little curtsey, and fixed her dark eyes earnestly on the visitor.

"Yes, I zink it vill be that I vill see. Zere is light all around you—ze great protecting light! Vill you sit here, at my feet; take off your gloves and hold my hands—so! Vait now; do not speak!"

She pulled out a hassock, on which Grace obediently seated herself. Giulia took her hands, holding them lightly and moving her own wrinkled brown ones over them with a curious massage-like movement for a minute or more, while she continued to gaze searchingly at her. Maddelena, pencil and notebook in hand, leaned on the back of Giulia's chair.

In the silence the slow tick of the clock sounded unnaturally loud; in Grace's ears her own heart-beats sounded even louder.

Then Giulia ceased moving her hands and grasped those of her visitor closely and firmly, in a grip that occasionally, during the minutes that followed, became almost painful. Grace saw the light fade from the old woman's eyes, leaving them fixed and glassy, like those of a corpse, till the lids drooped over them and she seemed to sleep, breathing deeply and heavily. Soon she began to speak, in Italian, slowly and with difficulty at first, then more fluently.

Grace, watching and listening with strained attention, could only understand a word here and there, but Maddelena later gave her the written translation.

"There is light all around you—a beautiful light; it is the great protection; but beyond there is gloom and within it I see a man; he is your beloved. I think he is young and handsome, but I cannot see him clearly. I could not see him at all but for the light around you that penetrates even to him. You stretch hands to each other, striving to meet—you in the light, he in the darkness—and sometimes the hands touch, just for a moment.

"Ah, the darkness passes a little. I see a large building; many people are there: it is a Court of Justice. The beloved is apart from you, from all, in a place by himself; there is but one beside him—I think he is an officer of police. The light streams from you to him, it gives him strength and courage.

"Alas! the darkness gathers; it shrouds you both now—black, black! The very Shadow of Doom—the Shadow of Death!"

Maddelena, still writing rapidly, almost mechanically, drew her breath with a little gasp of dismay, and Grace glanced at her with agonized eyes.

"What is she saying?" she whispered.

"S-sh—wait, it is not the end," Maddelena whispered back hurriedly. It seemed a long time, though probably it was not more than a minute, before Giulia spoke again.

"The light comes once more, but it is a different light, and the air is full of the odour of flowers. Now I can see. It is a large, a beautiful room—larger than the *maestro's* music-room. The hangings are green and the chairs are of gold. There are many flowers. A clock strikes—it is the ninth hour. Hush, there are footsteps and voices, low voices; men come in softly; I do not know them; they look like great lords. Now two more enter—one is young and one older; I have seen them before, but I know not where. You are not there, nor your beloved. Someone is speaking; I cannot see him, there is a mist rising—a red mist; it hides all. . . .

"But the end is not yet. Once more the light comes.

It is another room now—a smaller one. A woman kneels beside a bed. She is very still, and I cannot see her face, but I think—nay, I am sure—it is thou thyself, signora; and the light is all radiant above thee—the light of ‘the great protection.’ There is a little table close by with a telephone. Listen, it is the bell ringing. The woman rises—yes, she is thou. It is news, good news. The tears come, but, ah, they are tears of joy.

“Here is thy beloved—at last I see him clearly. He is at thy side, he is free. The shadow has passed away. See, thou art in his arms, and the light—the glorious light is upon both!”

Silence once more. Slowly her grasp relaxed—for days afterwards Grace’s hands showed blue marks from the grip of those strong brown fingers—she drew a long sigh, shivered, and then slowly opened her eyes and gazed dreamily at the girl.

“Vat is it? Vat have I see?” she muttered in her broken English.

“Thou hast seen much that was very strange and very comforting; thou hast done well, dear Giulia,” said Maddelena, leaning forward and bestowing a hug and kiss on her from behind. “Rest now, thou art exhausted. So, thou shalt sleep for a while.”

Giulia leant back and closed her eyes again, and Maddelena turned to Grace, who had risen with difficulty.

“Come, Mrs. Carling, she will be all right in a few minutes. You are faint and trembling. No wonder! It was a marvellous séance.”

“What did she see? What did she say?” faltered Grace, glad of the support of Maddelena’s strong young arm as the girl led her along the passage.

“I will tell you directly. I have it all down, or nearly all, I think, but in Italian—there was no time to translate. I will do that and send it to you to-morrow.”

“It sounded so tragic, so terrible,” said Grace piteously. “I couldn’t understand, of course; but surely she said

something about death—the shadow of death—when you seemed so upset ! ”

“ Yes. I was afraid for a moment, but the shadow passed in the end. I am sure, quite sure, she has seen rightly, and that Mr. Carling will be saved, though how I don’t know and she doesn’t, but listen.”

Rapidly she turned over her scrawled notes, and read the last part only, from the description of the room with the flowers and the green hangings. She thought it kindest to suppress the earlier episodes, and as a matter of fact did not divulge them fully to Grace until weeks later.

“ Do you recognize the rooms ? ”

“ Not the large one,” said Grace perplexedly. “ I cannot place it at all. But the other must be our—my—bedroom : the telephone is there, as she says. And you say she saw Roger there ! ”

“ Yes, that’s the very last thing ; you are to think of that, dear Mrs. Carling, whatever may happen. No matter how dark things may be, the light *will* come—the ‘ great protection ’ will be over you both all the time. So you will never lose courage even for a moment, will you ? Oh, I *am* so glad you came ! ”

“ You dear child ! ” cried Grace, and kissed her.

“ And now I am going to see you home—you are tired to death. Well, only to the station then, if you will have it so. And I may come and see you soon ? We will be friends, real friends, won’t we ? ”

When she arrived home, still musing over this strange, almost incredible, episode, Grace found Miss Culpepper—also playing “ patience ”—with a cheerful fire, a dainty little supper, and a loving welcome.

“ What a long day you’ve had, my dear. You must be worn out,” she said, fluttering round and helping her remove her wrap.

“ Yes, it has been long, but very interesting. And how have you got on ? Did Mr. Thomson come to tea ? ”

"Y-e-s—oh, yes, though he didn't stay very long. Sir Robert is not so well, and he was anxious to return. He brought me this—a beautiful little bit of bigotry, isn't it?"

"This" was an antique brooch, set with pearls, a really exquisite piece of workmanship.

"It's lovely, and suits you perfectly in that lace fichu."

"Yes. James always had excellent taste, and I really was very pleased, and very surprised. But do you know, dear Mrs. Carling, I see a great difference in him—naturally perhaps after all these years; but—oh, I don't know what it is, something I cannot fathom! And Brutus did behave so badly, spat and swore—*swore* at Mr. Thomson, till I actually had to take him out to the kitchen and shut him up there. It was quite upsetting!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SHADOW OF DOOM

THE trial of Roger Carling for the murder of Lady Rawson was drawing to an end. No case heard in the Central Criminal Court had ever created greater public interest, by reason of the sensational and unique circumstances of the crime, and the social status of the victim and of several of the persons involved.

Also, many of the callous and curious spectators, most of them fashionably dressed women, who waited for hours in the bitter cold of those grey winter mornings to gain admission to the court, fully expected a series of scandalous revelations ; for rumours had been rife of some passionate intrigue between the murdered woman and Roger Carling, or Boris Melikoff, or both men ; and circumstantial lies, invented by salacious minds, were broadcasted by malicious tongues from Mayfair and Belgravia to the far suburbs.

Those prurient anticipations were never satisfied. No fresh evidence was forthcoming ; but as the case developed so the tension increased, the interest became cumulatively more poignant, more painful, concentrated on the prisoner, pale and worn but perfectly self-possessed, and his girl-wife, whose eyes never left his face, and who seemed utterly oblivious of every one and everything else in the world except during the brief interval when, in the witness-box, she gave evidence on the important episode of the sudden change of their honeymoon plans.

The opening indictment by counsel for the Crown

seemed flawless. Inexorably, with consummate skill, and in absolutely passionless tones, he reconstructed and related the story of the crime, from the discovery of the theft of the secret papers to the arrest of the prisoner on the fourth day of his honeymoon. Calmly, relentlessly he wove the threads of circumstantial evidence and presented it as a complete web.

In imagination, those who listened saw Roger Carling enter on his hasty quest—"Bear in mind the importance that he attached, and rightly attached, to those missing papers—an importance so tremendous that his own wedding, the bride who was awaiting him at the very altar, became secondary considerations!"—followed him as in the increasing gloom he dogged the footsteps of his victim, watched him pass swiftly through the shop, unperceived by the other persons there, a circumstance that sounded almost incredible until its possibility was demonstrated by the model and plans of the place, which were duly passed to the jury for examination. Then the fatal stab in that obscure corner, a deed premeditated, if only for a brief minute beforehand, as the weapon (counsel held up that little tortoiseshell knife) must have been ready in his hand. It was the work of a moment; it was done not in the heat of passion, but coolly, deliberately; and as coolly and deliberately, having achieved his immediate purpose and regained possession of the papers, he thereupon not only effected his own escape for the time being, but, with a resource amazing in its ingenuity, instantly got rid of his incriminating booty, the recovered papers, in the one way that might, and as a matter of fact did, effect their safe return to Sir Robert Rawson, by posting them in the letter-box close at hand!

"Is it probable—nay, is it possible or even conceivable—that any other person than the prisoner, the one man in England who at that moment knew the contents and the inestimable importance of those documents, would have acted in such a manner?"

"The reaction came, naturally and inevitably. The prisoner's demeanour, the agitation he exhibited when eventually he arrived at the church where his bride awaited him, were precisely what might be expected in a man who had come straight from the perpetration of an appalling crime, as they were far in excess of the physical and mental distress that any ordinary individual would suffer through the accidental inconvenience and delay experienced in consequence of the fog.

"Finally, there was the sudden change of plans and of destination effected after the prisoner and his bride had actually started on their honeymoon. Why did he not take his bride to the hotel where rooms had already been booked for them? Because he had begun to realize what the consequence of his crime would be—feared that he would be arrested that very night, sought to gain time, a few hours, a few days."

Cummings-Browne sprang up.

"I protest! There is a complete explanation of the change of plans which will be given in evidence."

"My learned friend says the change of plans will be completely explained in the course of evidence. It will be for you, gentlemen of the jury, to decide on its significance when you have heard the explanation, as it will be your duty to weigh the whole of the evidence."

Hour after hour through that day and the next the succession of witnesses gave their evidence, and were subjected to searching cross-examination and re-examination by the respective counsel. Those in court, and they were many, who were familiar with the methods of the famous counsel for the defence discerned from the first that Cummings-Browne was on his mettle, fighting for his client's life against most desperate odds; for the great mass of evidence provided corroboration on nearly every point of the theory formulated by the prosecution; and in refutation of that theory there was practically nothing

except Roger's own simple, straightforward statement of his movements, and Grace's pathetic testimony regarding their change of plan, for which she insisted that she alone was responsible.

One point which Cummings-Browne elicited was, that while it was practically certain that the murderer wore gloves—a fact indicated by the smears on the bag—Sadler, the taxi-driver, swore positively that Roger Carling was not wearing gloves when he left the taxi.

"I noticed how cold his hands looked when he paid me, and wondered that a well-dressed young gentleman didn't have his gloves on on such a raw day."

Neither old Giulia nor any of the witnesses who were questioned concerning the time he arrived at the church, and his appearance when he did arrive, could give any definite information on this matter, while he himself admitted that he had gloves in his pocket, and very probably put them on while he was on his way to the church, though he had no recollection of doing so; but asserted that they were the same gloves—a pair of grey antelope—that he had worn on his journey back to Town when he was under arrest, and that were now among the "exhibits" in court. Those gloves were soiled, but with ordinary wear, and a microscopic examination proved that there were no incriminating stains on them, and that they had never undergone any process of cleaning.

That circumstance—so small in itself, but of such tremendous importance when a man's life depended on it—was duly emphasized by Cummings-Browne in the course of his three hours' speech for the defence—a speech afterwards acknowledged to be the most brilliant, the most impassioned, the most moving that even he had ever delivered; one that held his auditors enthralled.

There was dead silence for a few seconds after he sat

down, then a wave of emotion swept over the crowded court, and a spontaneous murmur of applause, instantly and sternly suppressed by the ushers.

Austin Starr, sitting close to Grace, drew a deep breath of relief and flashed a smile at Roger. He believed, as many others did at that moment, that Cummings-Browne had triumphed once more—that Roger was saved.

Then, grim and relentless as Fate, counsel for the Crown rose to reply. Bit by bit, calmly, remorselessly he demolished that eloquent defence, exposed the slight foundation on which it was based compared with the mass of evidence that supported the case for the prosecution; dwelt on the atrocious nature of the crime—"a crime far worse than ordinary homicide, for which there was often the excuse that it was committed in the heat of passion; but this was assassination—the cool, deliberate assassination of a helpless, defenceless woman!"

After that cold, calm, implacable denunciation came the judge's summing-up—grave, reasoned, meticulously impartial. Then the jury retired.

One hour, two hours dragged by, each seeming long as a lifetime. Would they never return? At last the little movement that heralded the final scene, counsel and solicitors, Grace Carling and her friends came in and resumed their places, the judge took his seat once more, the prisoner reappeared in the dock. Roger stood with shoulders squared, head erect, lips firmly set, pale indeed, but apparently as self-possessed as was the judge himself. The jury filed in.

"Guilty!"

With that one low-voiced word the Shadow of Doom seemed to descend; and above the subdued sound of sobbing the judge's deep, solemn voice was heard asking the prisoner if he had anything to say before sentence was passed on him.

Roger looked at him full and fearlessly, and answered in tones that rang through the court :

“ Only this, my lord, that I am absolutely innocent—innocent in thought as well as in deed—of this appalling crime ! ”

As he spoke Grace rose in her place, slowly, silently, till she stood at her full height, her hands clasped on her breast. There was a strange, ecstatic expression on her fair face, subtle and inscrutable as the smile of Mona Lisa, and her eyes were fixed on Roger's, as, from the moment he ceased speaking, his were fixed on hers.

So those two lovers looked at each other while the dread sentence was pronounced that would part them for ever in this world. They did not even seem to hear the words of doom.

Many women, and some men, were sobbing hysterically, none were unmoved ; but still Grace stood like a statue, scarcely seeming to breathe, gazing no longer at Roger—for he, with the two warders in attendance, had disappeared—but at the place where he had been.

Austin Starr slipped his arm round her on the one side, Winnie Winston, tearful and trembling, on the other.

“ We must get her away,” sobbed Winnie. “ Come, darling ! ”

She yielded to their touch, walking quite steadily, but as unconscious of her surroundings as a somnambulist.

Only when they reached the anteroom and a little crowd of friends and counsel clustered round her, she turned her head and looked at Austin, that faint unearthly smile still on her lips, and said, quite distinctly :

“ It is not the end. There is still the light—the great protection ! ”

With that she swayed forward, and Austin held and lowered her gently to the floor.

"Oh, she's dead!" cried Winnie, kneeling distractedly beside her. "Grace—Grace, darling!"

"She's only fainted, thank God! It's better for her," said Austin huskily.

CHAPTER XXV

THE LAST HOPE

IN the room that had once been Paula Rawson's boudoir Sir Robert Rawson lay on his wheeled couch, drawn up near a blazing fire. Of late he had extended his daily visits to this room of poignant memories, spending many hours there, with Thomson or Perkins in attendance on him—usually Perkins, for since the evening of Boris Melikoff's visit, when Sir Robert had detected and rebuked that "error of judgment" in his trusted old servant, he had not resumed the confidential relations that had existed between them for so many years. He never again referred, in words, to the incident, but an impalpable barrier had risen between master and man that in all probability would never be surmounted.

Over the mantelpiece hung the famous half-length portrait of Paula which, entitled "*The Jade Necklace*," had been *the* picture of its year at the Academy, a masterpiece that showed her in all her imperious beauty, dressed in a robe of filmy black over which fell a superb chain of jade beads, the one startling note of vivid colour in the whole picture.

For hours Sir Robert would lie and gaze at the portrait that seemed to gaze back at him with proud, tragic, inscrutable dark eyes. He was gazing at it now, and might or might not have been listening as Perkins conscientiously read aloud column after column from "*The Times*." Perkins read remarkably well—Sir Robert occasionally complimented him—but he often wondered whether his master really did listen!

He paused when the butler entered with a visiting card, on which a brief message was written in pencil below the name: "Entreating five minutes' interview on a most urgent and private matter."

"Mr. Austin Starr," Sir Robert muttered, frowning meditatively over the card.

"There's a lady too, Sir Robert," said Jenkins. "I asked her name, but the gentleman said she would only give it to you."

For a full minute Sir Robert pondered, holding the card in his thin fingers, before he answered slowly: "Very well. Bring them up, Jenkins. . . . You can wait in the next room, Perkins."

In the interval he looked up again at the portrait, with a strange expression in his haggard eyes, as if he were mutely questioning it; but his stern old face was impassive as a mask as he turned it towards his visitors.

"I remember you, Mr. Starr; but who is this lady?"

Grace, for it was she, came forward and raised her veil.

"I am Roger Carling's wife, Sir Robert."

He looked at her intently. He had seen her once or twice, when she had been a guest at his wife's receptions, and he never forgot a face he had once seen, but he could scarcely recognize in this pale, worn woman with appealing, pathetic, grey eyes, the radiant young girl of such a few months ago.

"I thought it might be you," he said slowly. "I am very sorry for you, Mrs. Carling—and sorry that you have come here to-day. I fear you will only add to your own distress—and to mine. Why have you come?"

"To plead with you for my husband's life," she cried. "As our very last hope, Sir Robert! You know—you must know—that the appeal has failed, the petition to the Home Secretary has failed, and to-morrow—to-morrow——"

She faltered and Sir Robert said grimly :

"To-morrow Roger Carling will pay the just penalty for his crime."

Austin clenched his hands in indignation, but dare not speak, dare do nothing to interrupt this terrible old man, who, if he could be prevailed upon to intervene, might yet save Roger Carling from the scaffold. If Grace could not move him, assuredly no one else could !

"No, no, Sir Robert—he is innocent ; you, of all people, should have known that from the first."

"I? I would give everything I possess in this world to be able to believe that, but I cannot. He has been tried and found guilty. There is no shadow of doubt that he *is* guilty, and that knowledge is the bitterest thing in the world to me, for I loved him, I trusted him as a son, and he murdered my dear wife !"

She fell on her knees beside his couch, stretching out piteous hands to him.

"Sir Robert, I implore you to hear me ! Roger never raised his hand against Lady Rawson. God knows who did, but it was not he ! The truth will be discovered some day, I don't know how or when, but it will ; and if it comes too late—and there are such a few hours, such a few short hours in which he may still be saved—his death will be at your door, on your conscience ! For you can save him now if you will ! Your influence is so great, if you will but say one word on his behalf the Home Secretary—the King himself—will listen to you, will respond to you as to no other man in the world. They will grant a reprieve, and then, whenever the truth does come out, his innocence will be established—he will be set free. Sir Robert, I implore you."

Again he looked at the portrait, and her agonized eyes followed the direction of his.

For a few seconds there was a tense silence. The deathly fragrance of the masses of flowers in the room seemed to increase till it was overpowering, suffocating.

Then Grace spoke softly, brokenly, not to the stern old man, but to the woman in the picture.

"Oh, if only you could speak; if you could but tell us the whole truth! Do you know—I wonder, I think you may do—how I wept and prayed for you when I learned of your terrible fate, that overshadowed those sacred hours of our happiness; how my beloved grieved for you and your stricken husband, whom he so loved and honoured? If you *do* know, then, as a woman, you will know what we suffer, in our great love and all our sorrow, with the shadow of doom upon us—you will strive to touch your husband's heart, to soften it towards us!"

"Enough!" Sir Robert's voice broke in harshly. "It is useless for you to invoke the dead, useless to ask me to intercede for your husband. I have no power to save him, and if I had I would not exert it; the law must take its course!"

Austin stepped forward impetuously.

"Sir Robert," he began indignantly, but Grace checked him with a gesture.

In some uncanny way she seemed suddenly to regain her composure, and rose to her feet, standing erect just as she had done in court when the judge pronounced Roger's doom. Slowly her glance travelled from the portrait round the beautiful room, as if she was noting each detail, and the two men watched her in silence.

"The room with green hangings and many flowers," she said softly: "the room where the truth will be made known—at the ninth hour."

"Come away, Grace," said Austin huskily, moving to her side and taking her arm. He feared her mind had given way at last under the long strain.

She looked at him with that faint, inscrutable Mona Lisa smile on her white face.

"It is all right, Austin, good friend. I am not mad. Yes, we will go—to Roger. It was good of you to see me, Sir Robert. I will forget what you have said; you

will know better soon—at the ninth hour. Good-bye. Come, Austin.”

She moved towards the door, scarcely seeming to need Austin's support, and when it closed behind them Sir Robert covered his eyes with his hand and sank back on his pillows.

As they went down the wide staircase Thomson silently appeared on the landing, and, after a moment's hesitation, followed them. Jenkins met them in the hall, ceremoniously ushered them out, and opened the door of the waiting taxi. Austin helped Grace into the cab and was about to follow her when Thomson crossed the pavement.

“Half a minute, Mr. Jenkins. Can I have a word with you, Mr. Starr?”

Jenkins retreated, imagining that Thomson had come with a message from his master, and Austin turned.

“Well, what is it?”

“This way, if you don't mind, sir,” said Thomson, drawing him a little aside. “Am I right in thinking that you and Mrs. Carling have been to ask my master to use his influence on behalf of Mr. Carling?”

“You are, and he has refused,” said Austin curtly.

“I feared as much, sir. And there's no hope that Mr. Lorimer, the Home Secretary, or the King himself, even now——”

“None that I can see.”

“I am very distressed, sir—very distressed indeed, but there's still time—while there's life there's hope! Could you manage to come round here again to-night, sir—say at nine o'clock?”

“Here! What for?” asked Austin bluntly.

“I can't explain, sir. I don't quite know yet, but if you would come—ask for Sir Robert—I think there might be someone here—there might be a chance. Better not

say anything to the poor lady, but perhaps you would give her my best respects, and try to cheer her up generally. Tell her not to despair."

"I'll come. And you're a good chap, Thomson," Austin said earnestly, though his own hopes were dead. He would have shaken hands with the little man, but Thomson evaded the proffered grasp and slipped back into the house.

Grace asked no question, but sat upright in her corner, with that strange, unnatural composure still possessing her.

They were on their way to the prison for their last interview with Roger, whose execution was fixed for eight o'clock on the following morning, and Austin, who had fought valiantly in the American Army in that last year of the Great War, had there seen death in many dreadful forms—the death of comrades whom he loved—dreaded this interview as he had never dreaded anything in his life before. Possibly for the first time in his life he felt an arrant coward, and when the moment came he was speechless. He just wrung Roger's hands, bent and kissed them, and hastily retreated, quite unconscious of the fact that the tears were rolling down his face.

It was quite otherwise with Grace. She spoke gently, with a gracious smile to the watchful warders, whose guard over the prisoner must now be ceaseless till the end, and then clung to Roger, raising her lips to his, her great, grey eyes shining, not with tears.

"It's not good-bye, darling," she said softly. "It's only till to-morrow—such a little time—perhaps even sooner—to-night, at the ninth hour—and we shall be at home together—at last. The light is coming—the great protection is over us!"

He thought, as Austin did, that for the time being at least she had become insane. It was better so, for her sake; but, oh, it was hard! He had to summon all

his fortitude. The iron will that had sustained him through all these terrible weeks must sustain him to the last.

"Good-bye, my own dear love. God guard you and bring you to me in His own good time," were his last words.

She flashed a radiant smile at him.

"Till to-morrow!" she said, and with that she left him, passing like a wraith, quite oblivious of the deep interest and sympathy of the officials, and of the prison chaplain who accompanied her and Austin to the outer gates, but with tactful delicacy refrained from speaking to her. He too thought, "it was better so."

Winnie and little Miss Culpepper, pale-faced and red-eyed, were waiting anxiously for her return. She smiled on them too, as they took off her outdoor wraps and lovingly tended her.

"Yes, I will have some tea—just a cup. And I'm so tired I'm going to lie down for an hour or two. You see it won't do for me to be a wreck when Roger comes home. That's nice. Thank you, darlings. You *are* good to me. If I don't wake before nine will you wake me then?"

Like a child she submitted to be wrapped in a rest-gown, and tucked up under the eiderdown on her bed. When Winnie stole in to look at her presently she was fast asleep.

"What does she mean about Roger coming home, and that we are to wake her at nine o'clock?" Winnie asked Austin when she rejoined the others.

"I don't know. She's been like *that*, poor girl, ever since we were with Sir Robert. He was brutal to her—brutal! I wish we had not gone, but you know how she insisted on doing so. She just stood and looked around the room, and I guess something snapped in her poor brain. She said something then about 'the ninth hour,' and it's a queer coincidence, but directly after,

old man Thomson, Sir Robert's valet, followed us and asked me to go back there at nine o'clock—though why, he wouldn't say, and I can't surmise. But I'm going ! ”

“ Did you tell her about that ? ”

“ No. He asked me not to. And it didn't seem any use to talk to her, poor girl ; she was just insensible, as you saw her now, like an animated corpse.”

“ How is Roger ? ”

“ Well, I can't quite say,” Austin acknowledged. “ I think he was quite calm, but—well, as a matter of fact, I wasn't ! The *padre*—Mr. Iverson—has permission to stay the night with him. He'll be there now, I guess.”

They spoke in hushed tones, as people do in the presence of death, and then lapsed into silence, sitting hand-in-hand, as unhappy a pair of lovers as could be found in London that night.

The evening dragged on. Time after time Winnie peeped into the bedroom, finding Grace still asleep, until just before nine, when Austin had departed to keep his appointment, she returned and whispered to Miss Culpepper that Grace had risen and was kneeling beside the bed.

“ She is very still, but she's breathing regularly and quietly. Look. I've left the door open. What ought we to do ? ”

“ Don't disturb her for a few minutes anyhow,” Miss Culpepper counselled ; and again they waited, outside the door, whence they could just see the kneeling figure, watching and listening intently.

The grandfather clock in the hall chimed and struck nine. At the sound Grace raised her head, then bowed it again.

Slowly the minutes passed, each, to those distressed watchers, seeming like an hour. A quarter past nine—half-past nine !

"I think we ought to rouse her now," Winnie whispered anxiously. "She will be quite numb and cramped—if she hasn't fainted!"

As she spoke the telephone bell sounded—a startling summons in that hushed place.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE NINTH HOUR

SILENTLY, and with his accustomed efficiency, Thomson moved about the boudoir rearranging some of the furniture. In the centre he placed the largest of the beautiful ormolu tables, set round it several of the gilt Louis-Seize chairs, leaving a clear space at the side that faced Lady Rawson's portrait; and finally put pens, ink, and paper before each chair. That done he made up the fire, looked round the room as if to assure himself that all was in order, and departed, going first to his own room. There he unlocked a drawer, took out an old cigar-box, glanced at the contents, and, with the box under his arm, went through to his master's bedroom.

Sir Robert was in bed and sound asleep. He had become restless and feverish after the departure of Grace Carling and Austin Starr, and Thomson had taken upon himself to ring up the doctor, who came round at once, ordered the patient to bed, and administered an opiate, which took effect immediately.

Thomson stood for a minute or so looking at his master's face, stern even in sleep, then slightly opened the outer door so that he could hear anyone ascending the staircase, and seated himself near, where he could still watch the invalid.

Presently he heard the sounds for which he listened—a knock and ring at the front door, soft footsteps outside, and glanced at the clock. Ten minutes to nine. He did not move, but still waited and listened.

Jenkins, the butler, acting on the very explicit instructions he had received, took the visitor up to the boudoir. He was none other than the Home Secretary, Gerald Lorimer—a tall, thin, aristocratic-looking man, with alert, clean-cut face.

He glanced round the room with an air of surprise, sniffed disapproval of the heavy perfume-laden atmosphere, and asked quickly:

“Where is Sir Robert?”

“In bed, sir; he has unfortunately been taken worse. Will you take a seat, sir; the other gentlemen will be here directly.”

“Other? Why, who is coming?”

“Lord Warrington, for one, sir; and, if you’ll excuse me, I think I hear his lordship arriving.”

Lord Warrington it was who entered next, and the two greeted each other with mutual amazement.

“What’s up now, Warrington? I hear Sir Robert’s ill.”

“So I hear; but he rang me up, or, rather, that invaluable factotum of his did so, and said Sir Robert begged me to come here at nine to-night on a most urgent matter, so I came of course.”

“Same here—precisely the same message. Looks as if it were to be a sort of board meeting. Is it about Carling? Poor chap! Personally, I wish it had been possible to save him, but that’s impossible, in the face of the evidence, and that verdict.”

“I suppose so,” Lord Warrington assented gravely. “It’s an awful tragedy—a brilliant youngster like that! And you know, Lorimer, if ever homicide was justifiable, that was—from *our* point of view. He ought to have been rewarded rather than punished! For if *she*”—he frowned up at the portrait—“had passed on those papers—whew!—Rawson himself never actually saw them, doesn’t know their contents to this day. If he did he’d think as I do, even though his own wife was the victim—as she was the

thief, confound her! I say, this room's pretty weird, what? Damn those flowers, they smell like death!"

"Here's Cummings-Browne. So it ~~is~~ about Carling," said Lorimer, and stalked towards the new-comer, his old friend since the days when they were both briefless barristers sharing chambers in the Temple. "Look here, old man, if you arranged this conference, or whatever it is, in the hope of getting a reprieve for Carling, you must know as well as I do that it's absolutely useless."

"I know nothing about any conference, and never expected to meet you here, Lorimer, or you, Lord Warrington. I had an urgent message from Rawson."

"As we did; but why on earth he sent for us we can't imagine, unless there is something fresh about Carling."

"I hope there may be. If he's hanged to-morrow you'll be responsible for a frightful miscarriage of justice, Lorimer!" said Cummings-Browne.

"Oh, come now! You put up a magnificent fight for him at the trial and since, but you don't—you can't—personally believe he is innocent?"

"You are wrong for once. I am absolutely convinced in my own mind that he is innocent—was convinced almost from the first. It's the most difficult, the most baffling case I've ever had!"

Lorimer looked at him perplexedly, but made no further comment, for Jenkins announced, "Mr. Austin Starr and Mr. Snell," and the two entered. They had arrived together, and exchanged murmured questions as they came up.

Cummings-Browne greeted Austin, Lorimer nodded to Snell with the question:

"Anything fresh, Mr. Snell?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"But what are we all supposed to be here for?" Lord Warrington demanded.

"I beg your pardon, my lord. If you and the other gentlemen will kindly be seated I will explain," said a quiet voice.

Lord Warrington turned sharply, so did the others, and stared at Thomson, who had entered silently, through the inner doors that led to the Chinese Room. He was carrying the cigar-box carefully in both hands, and looked pale, but otherwise self-possessed as usual.

"What is the meaning of all this? Why has Sir Robert sent for us?" asked Warrington imperatively.

"If you and the gentlemen will be seated, my lord, I will explain at once," Thomson repeated, advancing to the table and depositing the box on it. There was something so curiously compelling in his formal, respectful manner that they actually complied—Lord Warrington taking the head of the table, the Home Secretary facing him, Cummings-Browne opposite Thomson. Snell slipped round and took the chair beside Thomson, on his right hand, and, sitting sideways, watched him closely. Austin was on his left.

Thomson stood erect, looking down at the cigar-box, on which his right hand rested lightly. They all looked at him expectantly, a scrutiny which he seemed to disregard entirely.

"It was I who took the liberty in my master's name of asking you, my lord, and the other gentlemen to come here to-night," he said slowly, as if weighing every word before he spoke. "And when you have heard my explanation you will know that the matter was urgent—a matter of life and death; and also the importance that what I have to say should be written down. The materials are before you."

"It was I who killed my lady!"

If a bomb had exploded in their midst it could scarcely have created a greater mental sensation than those seven quietly uttered words. There was a low-voiced chorus of exclamation from his astounded listeners, which he

heard unmoved, never raising his eyes from the cigar-box ; then Cummings-Browne's stern voice,

"Go on. Tell us everything."

Thomson looked up then, met Browne's eyes full and steadily, and thenceforth addressed himself to him direct.

"I will, sir—from the beginning. On that morning when the papers were missing from Sir Robert's safe I was awake very early—I often am. At that time I slept in the basement : it is only since that date and Sir Robert's illness that I have occupied a room on this floor. I thought I heard a sound in the library just above. Later I had reason to believe it was the sliding of the panel that concealed the safe——"

"What time was this ? "

"Just after five, sir. I had heard the clock strike. I went out and along to the foot of the stairs in the dark and then saw there was a light in the hall. Thinking there might be burglars, I felt in a stand that is there in the lower hall, took a thick stick, and went softly up the stairs. Just as I got to the top I saw my lady, in a green dressing-robe, pass up the stairs, and a moment later the light went out—there is a control switch on the first floor. I went back to bed, thinking my lady had been down for a book.

"It was not till the middle of the morning, nearly noon, that Sir Robert sent for me to the library and told me some papers were missing. Mr. Carling was there and they were both very upset—very upset indeed."

"Did you tell Sir Robert what you had seen ? "

"No, sir. I realize now that I ought to have done so, but at the moment I didn't like to. Sir Robert told me not to say anything to anyone, and I did not. I went down and thought it over. I felt sure in my mind that my lady had the papers, whatever they were. I knew she was out—she had gone out about ten o'clock—so was her maid, Mam'selle Périer, who had been given the day

out. I wondered if my lady had gone to Rivercourt Mansions."

"How do you know she was in the habit of going there?"

"I had known it a long time, sir. I discovered the address almost by chance, from a letter."

"Blotting paper?" asked Cummings-Browne dryly.

"Well, yes, sir. My lady was careless once or twice that way, though it was only the address I could make out. I believe she was always very careful to post those private letters herself."

"And you had tracked her to the place?"

"Yes, sir, a good many times—usually at night. I nearly always knew when she was going; it would be on Mam'selle Périer's evening out, or when my lady sent her to a theatre, as she often did."

"Well, go on."

"I found out quite a lot one way and another about Mr. Melikoff and the Russians who used to go there, and the old Italian gentleman. It wasn't my business, of course, and I don't quite know why I did it, for I had no real grudge against my lady, except that I knew how my master doted on her, so to speak, and I felt she was not doing the right thing by him.

"And now I made up my mind all in a moment to go there and see if I could find out anything. I didn't ask Sir Robert. I thought I would risk him missing me, as I'd often done before, and it wasn't necessary for me to tell Mr. Jenkins or anyone else. I took the train, and just got to the corner of the square when, sure enough, I saw my lady herself cross the road to go into that post office. I knew it quite well, having been in and out several times when I'd happened to be in the neighbourhood.

"I followed her sharp, and peeped in. My lady was standing at the counter, and there was no one else in the shop but the person behind it, who had her back turned getting a telephone call. I went straight through—

neither of them saw or heard me—passed the telephone-box, and turned to the right by the foot of some stairs and the side door. There was another door farther on half open, leading into a scullery.”

Cummings-Browne nodded. He knew—so did Snell—how accurate the description was to the last detail.

“I don’t quite know what I meant to do. I think it was to snatch her bag as she went into the box and make a run for it. But—I had this in my pocket.”

He opened the cigar-box, took out an article that looked like the haft of a small dagger, of some dull metal elaborately chased, and held it up to view. There was a click, and out of the haft sprang a slender, vicious-looking little blade, some four inches long. Snell involuntarily put out his hand as if to seize Thomson’s arm, but the latter, having exhibited the weapon, pressed the spring again, causing the blade to disappear, and laid the thing on the table.

“I bought it off a sailor years ago in Constantinople, when I was there with my master, and he used to go about so reckless by himself in places that weren’t safe for an English gentleman that often I followed him, with this as a sort of protection, but I never had to use it—never did use it but the once!

“I don’t know what came over me all in a moment. When my lady had gone into the telephone-box I found I’d got the dagger in my hand. I opened the door, struck at her, and snatched the bag that was resting on the little sloping shelf under the instrument. She only made a little gurgling sound and dropped forward. I shut the door on her and went through to the scullery and pushed to the door. The whole thing couldn’t have taken half a minute, and I was just in time, for I heard someone come along to the stairs and call ‘Jessie!’ There was a wet rag on the scullery table—the place didn’t seem to be used much for anything but rubbish: there was a heap of waste paper and boxes in the corner. While I waited I

wiped my glove on the rag and took it off ; here they both are. I've never cleaned them."

He took a neatly folded pair of tan gloves out of the cigar-box and laid them on the table.

"I opened the bag, found the big envelope addressed to Sir Robert just as Mr. Carling had said, and knew the papers must be inside, but didn't try to look at them. I also found this key and this little box, and put them in my pocket."

He took out a Yale latchkey and a small ornate powder box of gold set with jewels, and placed these beside the other articles.

"I saw through the window a taxicab standing before the side door. There was no one at all in sight, so I listened for a minute—by the sound there were several people in the shop—then went out at the side door, put the bag through the cab window, walked away, slipping the envelope into the pillar box at the corner. Then I walked to the station, got a train at once—I had taken a return ticket—and was back here soon after two. I had only been away just over an hour, and so far as I know I had never been missed.

"I found my dinner on a tray in my room—I have always had my meals in my own room—and I sat down and ate it."

"Ate his dinner! Good heavens!" muttered Lord Warrington. The others were silent, Austin Starr, an expert stenographer, was taking down the confession verbatim ; the Home Secretary and Cummings-Browne making occasional notes ; Snell maintained his ceaseless vigilance.

"I had just finished when Sir Robert's bell rang for me. I went up to the library and found him and Mr. Snell there. Sir Robert again questioned me about the papers, and while he was speaking the news came by telephone that my lady had been murdered, and my master fell down in a fit.

"That's about all it's necessary to tell, I think, though if I might be permitted to say a few words more—about this key, and something else——"

"Go on ; say all you have to say," Cummings-Browne responded.

"Thank you, sir. I knew this key wasn't one of ours—of this house—and I thought it just possible it might be the key to Mr. Melikoff's flat. I knew, too, that my lady had written him a lot of letters first and last, and that if they should ever be found they might raise a scandal that would add to Sir Robert's trouble, and I made up my mind to try and get hold of these. It was some time before I got the opportunity—it was a risky thing to do, of course. But the day that Mr. Carling was committed for trial I managed it. I knew the whole household was in the police court—I saw them there when I was in the witness-box in the morning—and in the late afternoon I went to the flat, and sure enough the key fitted. I had a look round just to take my bearings, found Mr. Melikoff's room—there was a photo of my lady on his writing-table—and found the letters in a drawer of it. I was just about to go when they all came back ; I'd run it a bit too close ! I slipped into a room opposite Mr. Melikoff's—a bare room, that looked like a school-room with very little in it except a piano and music-stands—and bolted the door. I thought, and so it turned out, that it wouldn't be used at night. Hours and hours I waited there in the dark and cold before it seemed safe to try and get out.

"At last I ventured, and when I got into the hall, where the light was on, I saw the drawing-room door was ajar ; there was a curtain inside, so I couldn't see in."

"But the door had been closed !" ejaculated Austin Starr.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Starr, I assure you it was open then, just an inch or two, and I heard voices inside—your voice, sir, and a lady's, and you were talking about Lady Rawson. Dangerous as it was I couldn't help

listening for a minute ; then I turned off the hall light and slipped off, closing the front door quietly with the key, and got away all right. Here are the letters.

“ One word more, my lord and gentlemen. It was a terrible shock to me when Mr. Carling was accused, and I never believed they'd find him guilty, and right up to to-day I hoped he would be reprieved, so that it mightn't be necessary for me to own up just yet. If my master had died I would have owned up at once ; but I did hope I should be able to tend him as long as he needed me—and he needs me more now than he ever did before.”

For the first time his voice faltered, and he leaned with both hands on the table, as if for support. Snell half rose, but sat down again as Thomson recovered himself and resumed :

“ It would be very kind if you could keep the truth from Sir Robert, for a bit anyhow—if you could tell him I'd been taken ill. And Mr. Carling will be safe—he'll soon be released now, won't he, sir ? ” He looked at the Home Secretary, and from him to Lord Warrington. “ And you'll excuse the liberty I took in sending for you all. I wouldn't leave nothing to chance, so to speak. And now, Mr. Snell, I'm quite ready for you, and I'll go quiet, of course, though I suppose you'll want to put on the handcuffs, if you've got them with you ? ”

They all rose, and Thomson, respectful to the last, stepped back and stood, with Snell close beside him, as if the buzz of low-toned, agitated conversation among the others did not concern him in the least.

Austin Starr unceremoniously clutched Lorimer's arm.

“ Say, Mr. Home Secretary, this does it ! Roger Carling's saved ? You'll put the order for his release through right now ? ”

“ It will have to be ' the King's pardon,' of course, and it will be put through at the earliest possible moment. Thank God that—that extraordinary old villain confessed to-night ! ”

"When will Roger be home?"

"That I cannot say at the moment—possibly to-morrow."

"I may 'phone right now to his poor young wife?"

"Assuredly; and I will telephone to her myself later."

Austin glanced round the room. A telephone was there, but concealed under a tall Sèvres china doll gorgeously arrayed in Louis-Seize court costume, and he couldn't see it. Downstairs he dashed, and seized the instrument in the hall.

"Victoria ten-four-double-three, quick please! That you, Grace? Austin speaking. Oh, my dear girl, it's all right! Roger's saved—cleared! He'll be home as soon as ever the Home Secretary can fix it. Old Thomson's confessed everything right now. It was he who murdered Lady Rawson!"

CHAPTER XXVII

INTO THE LIGHT

AT Argeles in the Pyrenées—where already the sheltered valleys were glorious with spring blossoms, where the snow mountains shone dazzling under the strong sunshine against the deep blue of the sky, and the air was exhilarating as champagne—Roger and Grace Carling finished and prolonged the honeymoon that had been so tragically interrupted.

They left England as soon as possible after Roger's release, which created even more sensation than his trial and condemnation had done, and here in this idyllic retreat, where they were quite unknown, these two lovers, who had gone together through the very valley of the shadow of death, in which all seemed lost, save love, rejoiced in the sunshine, and in each other, restored as if by a miracle to life and hope and youth.

Miss Culpepper, at her own desire, remained in charge of the little flat until they should return. The staunch little woman's joy at Roger's vindication—"vitiation" was her word for it—was very little affected by the knowledge that Thomson was the criminal; in fact, she accepted it quite philosophically.

"It's terrible to think James should have done such a deed, but I don't think I am really surprised after all. I saw a great change in him when he came here on Christmas day, as I think I told you, my dear. It was something—oh, I don't know how to describe it in English—something *mécompte*—that means sinister, you know—

that I didn't like at all. I shall never again wear that brooch he gave me ! ”

The day before they left England Roger had a message from Sir Robert, begging him to go to see him. He did so and found the old man still in bed, very frail and broken.

“ Can you **ever** forgive me, Roger ? ” he asked piteously, clinging to Roger's hands and searching his worn face with anxious, haggard eyes.

“ There's nothing to forgive, sir. Things looked so very black against me, it was only natural that you should have thought as you did ; and I know how that belief must have added to your grief and distress.”

“ I shall never forgive myself. I ought to have known you better, my boy. And to think that it should have been Thomson, of all people in the world—after all these years I have trusted him ! Well, well, it's a strange and terrible world ; but I shall soon be done with it. I shall never see you again, Roger ; but while I do last—I hope it won't be many weeks—you'll never be out of my mind. You'll come back, with your dear young wife—ask her to forgive me too—and take up your career. It will be a brilliant one. I think I've been able to ensure that you will have your chance, and I know how great your abilities are ! Have you seen Warrington yet ? ”

“ Yes, I've just come from him. He was kindness itself, and has offered me an excellent post ; I am to take up my duties after Easter. He told me what you said about me, Sir Robert. It was very good of you ! ”

“ Good ! It was the bare truth, and the very least I could do to make some amends. I shall make more amends, as you'll know in time, Roger. Good-bye, my dear boy, good-bye. In time perhaps—Time is always the great healer—you will be able to forget as well as to forgive ! ”

Roger never saw him again. Next week news of his death reached them at Argeles, and later tidings that he

had bequeathed to them both ten thousand pounds, and to Roger the greater part of his superb library.

Towards the end of Easter week, Austin and Winnie unexpectedly turned up at Argeles, also on their honeymoon, having been quietly married on the previous Tuesday. "Nobody there but George, and a dear fat old pew-opener," Winnie announced gleefully. "And we decided we must come and have a peep at you two. Can't we all go back together next week as far as Paris? Then we're off to the States, via Havre."

"That's so, but only for a few months. We shall come back to London in the fall," said Austin. "Say, Roger, have you seen any New York papers?"

"Not I, and very few others. We've almost forgotten, here, that the Press exists!"

"I guess so. But you may be interested to hear that Cacciola's first concert—Melikoff's début—was an immense success. Melikoff got right there—a regular furore; the critics are just about raving over him and Miss Maddelena—or Mrs. Melikoff as I suppose she is by this time, for they're to be married this week. Won't she mother him—some; keep a tight hand over him, too, I guess."

Later, when Austin and he were alone together, Roger asked for news of Thomson.

"I meant to tell you, though not while Grace was here. You know he was certified as insane and unable to plead, and so was consigned to Broadmoor?"

Roger nodded.

"Well, I got permission to go and see him last week. He's mad, right enough, but only on the one point, that he seems to have forgotten everything about the murder, and thinks he is still in Sir Robert's service; but on every other point he appears as sane as you or me. He's a model prisoner, gives no trouble, and devotes himself to a fellow-criminal—patient I suppose one might say—whom he believes to be Sir Robert, an old man who really does resemble him, white beard and all. He waits on him

hand and foot, and they tell me he's always miserable when he's out of his sight! He knew me well enough and seemed glad to see me.

" 'I take it very kind of you to come, Mr. Starr,' he said. 'We're fairly comfortable here, though it's not what Sir Robert has been used to, of course; but he's much better—very much better. May I ask if you've seen Mr. Carling lately?'

" 'I said I hadn't—that you and Mrs. Carling were abroad, but I should probably be seeing you soon, and he answered:

" 'If you do, sir, perhaps you'll give them my best respects and good wishes. A very nice gentleman is Mr. Carling. My master misses him greatly and will be glad to see him back.'

" 'Then he said something that I couldn't make sense of; perhaps you can? Would I ask Mrs. Carling to tell little Maria that he did write to her more than once, and she never answered, so that it really wasn't his fault. Do you know what he meant?'

" 'Yes. Grace told me. Maria's our little Miss Culpepper. They were in service together, and more or less in love with each other years ago, but somehow drifted apart and only met the day old Thomson came round and insisted on lending five hundred pounds of his savings for my defence. Oh, of course that's news to you; I forgot he enjoined Grace to secrecy.'

" 'He did that! Well, he's the most extraordinary case I've ever struck! I wonder whether he really is mad, or only consummately clever? Anyhow, I'm convinced that when he killed Lady Rawson he did it with no more animus—and no more compunction—than I'd kill a 'squito!'

Roger made a warning gesture.

" 'Hush, here are the girls. Don't speak of him before Grace!'

.

Later from the balcony he and Grace watched these two loyal friends go down the road to their hotel, and stood there long after the sound of their footsteps had died away. Roger's arm was round his wife, her dear head rested on his shoulder.

It was a beautiful evening, with a full moon flooding the valley and the towering snow mountains beyond with almost unearthly radiance, and no sound but the murmur of the river and the light breeze stirring the young leaves and white "candles" of the chestnuts.

London and the great busy world—all the tragedies and the shadows of the past—seemed very far away!

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